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## Silk Road: A Novel

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SILK ROAD: A NOVEL

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing  
in the Department of English at The University of Mississippi

by

MCKAY MCFADDEN

April 2014

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## ABSTRACT

*Silk Road* is a work of fiction.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

No abbreviations or symbols.

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## LIST OF TABLES

None.

## LIST OF FIGURES

None.



## CHAPTER 1

As the road ascended into the thin, cold air of the Tibetan plateau, we saw the curvature of the Earth drop behind the steppes we'd crossed in the past weeks, a sea of dark violet tundra. I was with my ex-boyfriend Frank and our friend Nate, hitch-hiking to Central Asia. We rode in open truck beds amid swiveling barber chairs, bolts of brocaded silk, crates of white Hetian jade and burlap bags of elephant garlic, all bound for export. Our single-track road was made narrower by road workers' tents which clung onto steep mountainsides like fungi. Had there been any vultures that high they would have feasted on the piglet carcasses discarded by the laborers.

On the high passes we shivered in our sleeping bags and breathed in the spectral clouds. I was so happy to be out there. In that cloudscape we were part of the swirling sky, and it was easy to believe in astral travel. Tibet was like that: it appeared to be desolate, unless you were capable of believing in Buddhism, which storied the plateau with roving, ancient atmans. Alpine lakes shone like lapis lazuli, unexpected luminosity that hummed with the dreams of boddhistavas who lay sleeping under the surface.

The only other girls I saw were prostitutes who hung around army checkpoints and nuns on pilgrimages to Mt. Kailash. The nuns strapped wooden blocks onto their hands to protect their palms as they prostrated every one-hundred-and-eighth step. The prostitutes sat back to back at crossroads, asleep, their long, dirty hair tangling together.

On windy nights the makeshift trucker huts where we slept sang like Theremins conducted from the sky, and sometimes the tarp ceilings blew off, exposing us to the icy,

minatory moon. The truckers explained that the wrathful deity White Brahma Buddha was up there slashing the darkness with his sword, protecting the nomads' yaks from the silent snow leopards that crept around us. In the thin air I dreamt of drowning.

Frank worked as a photographer in Beijing, and we were out there because he'd been hired for a series on migrant workers in China's frontier. Frank had invited Nate and then Nate invited me. At home in New York I thought that Nate was interested in me, but since we'd arrived in China his attention had drifted. I didn't know why. I looked for affection in everything they each did.

When Frank introduced me as his wife so truckers wouldn't assume I was for hire, I felt like I was in love with him again, as if he were proposing. But Frank would never propose. His heart orbited around a black hole of independence at the expense of everything else. That's why we'd broken up. When you love someone who privileges freedom above all else, who suspects you of trying to shrink his world, not expand it, you have two choices: prove to him that love is not possession, or prove that you don't want to possess him. I tried both, but honoring his fears at the expense of mine brought me so much pain, and when he saw how much his ambivalent love hurt me, it confirmed to him that he'd rather be alone. His preferred state was exile, a mode of living by spontaneity, which was like carrying a gun, every moment heightened with the potential for heroism and death.

The thing about Frank is that if you could keep up with him, you got to share in the thrill of his devouring of the world. Like me, he believed the grandeur of his environment could

stretch the possibilities of his mind, but, unlike me, he'd deliberately made his life into a search for these landscapes. His photographs were proof that the world he wanted to exist could, but you had to seek it and you had to frame it by your own vision. His photographs made me want to sneak out in the night and jump onto trains and swim in clear rivers and hold your hands out to bonfires. He shot straight into light for the prisms, blind spots, and the blown-out whiteness of ecstasy. He shot the road workers' velvet slippers embossed with the Playboy bunny, and the golden calves of reclining Buddhas, and the sparkling quartz and mica of gneissic cliff faces that belied seismic catastrophes. As my boyfriend, he'd also taken so many portraits of me: of my collar bones under water, of the profile of my sleeping face on his bare chest, of my hair blowing wildly on mountain passes, of my dirty hands offering him coffee, of his palm on my wind-burned, happy cheek. I wanted to be the person I looked like in his photographs. But that person's existence depended on Frank's existence.

After five weeks crossing the plateau we were hungry for food that wasn't instant noodles, thirsty for oxygen, bruised from the bumpy roads, and red from the sun, which glared off the snowpack, burning our necks and eyeballs and chapping our lips and hands. We planned to rest in Kashgar, the palm-treed oasis town that marked the end of the plateau and our descent into the desert, for a few days before our visas expired and we crossed into Kyrgyzstan.

We checked into a hotel in Kashgar — mattresses, coffee that wasn't Nescafe, hot water — and ate in a night bazaar lit by smoky kerosene lamps. Lamb heads and chicken feet hung as advertisements from the vendors' carts. Men tossed noodle dough into long strips like jump

ropes. I bought almonds, cinnamon cakes, and figs. With great pleasure we deliberated the next days' meals over over cold Tsingtao beer. Frank was drunk and trying to convince Nate to go to a strip club with him. I thought it was a show Frank was putting on for me, baiting me to object.

"I'm not going," Nate said, "not in a Muslim city."

"But, it's still China. This is what businessmen do here. It's normal. It's like Bangkok."

"You're not businessmen," I said.

"It doesn't feel like Bangkok," Nate said. There were two-humped camels in the street, bearded men in skullcaps embroidered with crescent moons, and watchful women in knotted burkhas.

"Well, it won't be a ping-pong show, but I still think we should go."

"Ping-pong show?" I said. I fell for it.

"The chicks shoot the ping-pong balls out like an air gun," Frank said. "Their muscles are so strong. You can *feel* it."

"How do you know what it feels like?" I said.

"What's it to you? It's legal."

"You aren't supposed to tell her that!" Nate said.

"You paid for it?"

"It's normal there," Frank said. "It's an entire industry." Frank and I had been dating when they went on that trip to Thailand, and I didn't know if he'd forgotten that, or if he was being cruel.

“It was a long time ago,” Nate said, “and we just did it once.”

“Maybe you did,” Frank said. “Besides, it’s a good-paying job for them.”

“Don’t act like you’re doing them a favor,” I said.

“You don’t know anything about it,” Frank said. “Don’t be such a prude.”

Even though Frank had lost his virginity to me in high school, and we’d had sex many times, he still called me that. I wasn’t going to argue with him about it in front of Nate, but it hurt my feelings. He acted like he knew everything about sex and I knew nothing. I didn’t like the way he talked about women, but I didn’t like being left out either. Nate would laugh. I couldn’t. I felt defeated by it.

On the way into our hotel bar we stopped at the front desk to ask about the Kyrgyz border crossing.

“Border closes tomorrow,” the man said. “Maybe one week closed.”

“Can we cross tomorrow?” Frank asked.

“I advise leave now,” he said.

“Now?” It was one in the morning.

“Problems at the border, sir,” he said.

“What do you think?” Nate asked, his cigarette hanging from his mouth, his green eyes bright against his new, dark beard. His flannel shirt was covered in dust and his jeans had streaks of engine grease across the thighs. Still, I wanted to put my head against his chest. I wanted him to put his dirty arms around me. I wanted to make Frank shut up.

“I have to get the exit stamp,” Frank said. In order to live legally in Beijing, he had to leave the country every three months. He had three days left on his visa.

“OK, Elizabeth?” Nate said.

“Fine,” I said. It wasn’t fine. I wanted privacy to think about Frank and the prostitute.

“We’ll take a taxi in thirty minutes,” Frank said.

“They’re closing the border because of an election,” Nate said as we walked to our rooms.

“In Kyrgyzstan?” I said.

“They’re expecting riots.”

“Says who?” Frank said.

“State department website.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t go?” I said.

“You know I can’t afford to have problems with my papers,” Frank said.

“The riots will probably just be in the capital,” Nate said.

“So why would they close the border?”

“We have to go,” Frank said to me. “I’ll go deal with the bill. Try not to take such a long time packing.” He went downstairs with his bag.

“What do you know about the election?” I asked Nate.

“I can’t even pronounce the parties’ names. One’s Islamist and the other’s old Soviets.”

“Don’t you think that sounds worse than paperwork problems here?”

“Frank has to get his stamp,” he said, “and I want to see the Pamir Highway. Come on, it’s supposed to be the most beautiful road in the world. We’re so close.”

There had been many times on the trip when I thought we were doing something too risky, like traveling without the required guides and permits into China’s disputed regions, or hitching rides with truckers burnt out on speed. I was tired of being the one who was afraid of everything. I was also mad at Frank for calling me prude, which beyond the sexual insult was what he was always criticizing me for: I was too timid. I was too sheltered. I was too passive. One of the reasons I’d come on this trip was because I wanted to be as unflinching as he was. I clenched my fists so my nails dug into my palms and said to myself, don’t make them regret bringing you.

Downstairs they were squatting around a mah-jongg game with the driver. We bought cold beer and a carton of Gauloises to barter with and took off into the desert in the taxi. The highway soon deteriorated into a dirt track, and when we pulled over to let someone pass, the somnolent smell of sage from under our tires saturated the night air. The taxi driver turned off the headlights to make his car stereo louder and played a Bollywood musical we’d heard all over China, and he loved that we knew the words. We offered him beer, and even though he was Muslim he drank with us. The guys cranked down the windows and stuck their heads out, looking for oncoming traffic, or looking at the sky, which touched down on the desert all around us like a black, silky parachute.

To our right the tundra extended north onto the Mongolian steppe. Unseen, far off on our left, were the Himalayas, holy white peaks in the sky. We sang and drank and smoked. I leaned against Nate's shoulder. This road was developed a century before Christ, when Chinese traded silk for Fergana horses so tough they were said to sweat blood. For hundreds of years caravanserais and cities rose from the sand only because China guarded the secret of silk production—the silk worm.

When I looked into the dark desert I imagined the astronomers who'd made their camps there, tracing the night sky with gold dust to make illuminated manuscripts for their khanates. Riderless donkeys had led thousand-camel caravans loaded with sesame seeds, figs, and magnetic compasses east in return for the bolts of silk that went west, much of it bound for insatiable consumers in Rome. Sutra-seeking pilgrims gathered at these oases, relaying the news that the prince Siddhartha Gautama had escaped samsara, the cycle of suffering. This exchange of goods, peoples, and ideas continued for six-hundred years, until a scorned princess smuggled silk worms out of China in her coiffure. I looked into the emptiness, knowing that the religions, the warriors, the women, and the empires that made our world had once considered this desert its center.

I wanted legends. I wanted exotica. I wanted to be like those heroes from history, traders and explorers, astute and adventurous, and different from everyone who stayed home. I wanted to see the next place and the next place. I was twenty-three. I was out there for moments like these, when I was wide-awake, sustained by anticipation.



The road ended at the border station, a squat concrete building demarcating the end of the Far East. A crowd of women waving maos closed in on the taxi as we slowed. They wore long skirts and their heads were covered in floral scarves that looked like tablecloth scraps. They weren't Chinese. Their cheeks were wider, their eyes like almonds.

"They want to shop in Kashgar," Frank translated as the driver spoke, "before the border closes. They're Kyrgyz."

As we pushed through the women to get our bags from the trunk, their desperation to take our seats scared me. The taxi left us, and before the driver killed its lights, I saw the women's arms throwing our beer bottles out the window.

"Do you think they'll ask about my dad?" I said. My father had been a U.S. Senator since I was eleven. Nate and Frank knew not to bring him up, and I hadn't met anybody who asked about him yet. But this was our first border crossing. We didn't know if he would help or endanger us out here. I'd refused to carry a diplomatic passport. The only thing I had was a list of phone numbers to call in an emergency.

"I don't think you should say anything," Frank said. "I'll talk."

"But don't lie if they ask you," Nate said.

Few people spoke English well enough to talk to me without going through Frank, so I wasn't worried about being confronted. I doubted the border guards would recognize my name, Elizabeth Austen Moore, and even if they did, I trusted Frank to handle it.

To make the border crossing we needed to get through this Chinese post with tourist exit stamps, as opposed to press corps stamps, and then clear the Kyrgyz customs on the other side. We divvied Frank's camera gear between us so he wouldn't look like a journalist.

"Don't leave me alone," I said to Frank.

"You've got the rest of my film," he said. "I won't."

We went together to speak to the Han guard. He copied our names into a ledger and asked us to sign. I loved seeing our names in that book, neat block letters amid Cyrillic curves and Mandarin characters.

"He says it's ten kilometers of demilitarized road to the Kyrgyz border station. We have to hitch with one of these truckers," Frank said. The guard wrote the exit date on the visas in our passports and didn't ask to search the bags or about my name.

"Demilitarized?" I said.

"Welcome to the U.S.S.R.," Nate said. He was thrilled. We were entering the outposts of the former Russian empire. We didn't know anybody else who'd been there.

The sun was rising behind us. It wasn't a soft light, wasn't romantic or pink. The atmosphere was so clear and the distances around us so vast that the cold dawn lit us like a harsh halogen bulb switched on in the middle of the night, tingeing our faces in an electromotive green.

Frank pointed to a truck painted in a technicolor lattice pattern and a mural of a Pakistani Airlines jet over the Hindu Kush. Dozens of small brass bells hung from the bumper, and flashing rope lights looped around the back. A young man in an Air Jordan t-shirt sang along to

pop music as he cleaned his windshield. Frank wanted to photograph him. The trucker showed his truck off to Frank, who was so excited he forgot not to look like a journalist, setting up his tripod and walking around the truck with his light meter.

The trucker agreed to take us to the Kyrgyz border station for about five bucks, though there was barely room for us. The front seat was taken up by a bedroll, blankets, and clothes, which I sat on. Coins and whirligigs hung from the ceiling on ribbons. He made us take off our shoes, and the guys' feet stank up the cab. They crawled to the space behind the front seats and sat on boxes of radishes. We drove slowly, the driver yelling over the music and grating engine. I could tell he was asking Frank about me.

"Meiyou, meiyou," Frank said, which means no, not possible.

"He has track marks," I said, looking at his bruised, thin arms. His teeth and gums were stained black from chewing betel.

We'd driven about five kilometers, halfway, when Frank pulled out his camera. The driver watched him in the rearview mirror. Even though Frank had already taken dozens of photographs of him in the lot, now the driver waved his arms and shook his head.

"Something's wrong with him," Frank said. "He's slurring." Frank apologized, but before he put his camera away we all heard the click of the shutter.

The driver turned to Frank, black spit dripping down his chin. Frank yelled at him, pointing at the road. It was as if the man forgot he was driving. He pulled a knife from under his

seat. There was so little space in the cab that we couldn't back away from him. Frank tried to calm him, but he wasn't listening.

There weren't any doors in the back where they were sitting. "Open the door, Elizabeth," Nate said. "Jump out!"

"Too fast," I said. I had my hands on the ceiling, caught up in the ribbons and clinking medallions, trying to protect my head as we bounced over deep ruts.

Nate kicked at the driver's seat, jiggling it back and forth, trying to break the man's angry trance. The driver stabbed his knife into the pile of bedding between us. The way the blade sunk into the thick wool blanket terrified me. I was as close as I could get to the door.

"Don't touch her!" Nate yelled, kicking harder. The driver's seat wasn't locked into place, and it sprang forward. His face hit the steering wheel, and we went off the road as he lay limp over the wheel. I jumped out. I tried to roll when I hit the ground but really just lay there where I landed. The truck stopped in the sandy soil.

"Are you hurt?" Nate said.

"No," I said, but I didn't get up. He put his hand on my head, as if he were checking to see if I had a fever. I stared up at him. I wanted to stay like that.

"What's wrong with her?" Frank said.

"Nothing." Nate pulled me up and hugged my face into his chest and kissed my forehead.

"Is the driver hurt?" I said.

Nate went to check.

“Don’t get too close,” I said.

“What are we going to do about it if he is hurt?” Frank said.

“There’s blood coming out of his nose,” Nate said.

“Should we wait for the next truck?”

“I am not getting in another truck,” Frank said. “Let’s start walking.”

“We can’t leave him,” I said.

“He’s breathing,” Nate said. “We’ll tell the first person we see. What can we do for him?

He still has that knife in his hand.” Nate pulled our shoes and bags out of the cab.

I looked in from the passenger side. I didn’t think we should leave him.

“What was he saying?” Nate asked.

“I don’t know,” Frank said. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Nate and I looked at each other, surprised at the panic in Frank’s voice. I didn’t have a good argument for staying. We were afraid to get within arm’s length of him. We decided to wave down the first car we saw and explain what had happened. We put on our backpacks and walked to the road. It was hilly enough that we couldn’t see far in front of us. We walked west, towards Kyrgyzstan.

It got hot fast out there, and my adrenaline faded. We stopped at an abandoned truck alongside the road, its wheels deep in the sand. The wooden truck bed had exploded from being overpacked with garlic that must have swelled in the sun. Garlic cloves piled like drip castles underneath the splits in the siding. We sat on our bags in the pungent shade of the truck.

“We’re protected from vampires,” I said.

“Yetis are our real problem out here,” Nate said, “and cracked-out drivers.”

“I’m worried about him.”

“He was probably shooting up before we got in,” Frank said, “and now he’s passed out.”

“He’s not passed out,” I said. “He’s hurt.” I knew Frank was acting like this because he felt guilty about taking that last photograph. We were in a no-man’s-land between the Chinese and Kyrgyz governments. It was a bad place for anyone to be hurt.

We saw a car coming from the China side. Frank walked to the road to wave it down. Kyrgyz women were crammed into the back seats. The women were pointing at us, their white fingertips pressed against the window. They didn’t stop.

“What was that?” Nate said.

“Let’s keep walking,” I said. “I don’t like being trapped in here.”

“Frank, why wouldn’t they stop?” Nate said.

“I don’t know.”

I was worried for him. Frank was the one with the most to lose if we got in trouble with China. He had been hired by a German newspaper to photograph the next year’s Olympics, and he intended to stay in Beijing a long time. He was so proud of his fluency; he’d done all the necessary negotiating on the road for us, ordered all our food, translated the truckers’ stories. He brought Mandarin workbooks with him to improve his vocabulary, and he asked lots of questions of people we met, always trying to understand the language and the people better. But, he had a

bad temper and could be callous about important things, like if we were responsible for the driver.

“They’re just looking at us because we’re weird,” I said.

“Speak for yourself,” Frank said.

“You’re the weirdest thing out here,” I said. I wanted to make them laugh. “Those fucking pants.” Frank wore fake North Face cargo pants that unzipped at the knee. He said he needed all the pockets for his camera gear.

“At least I know how to rub my sunscreen in so I don’t have ghost face,” Frank said.

“Will you two shut up?” Nate said.

We walked on. Frank kept looking behind us, as if the driver was going to jump on his back.

“I think he’s fine, Frank,” Nate said. “He’s probably passed out, like you said.”

“What do you know?” Frank said.

“We’re here,” I said. We looked down on glass shards gleaming along a concrete wall surrounding the border station. There was a barbed-wire perimeter and a guard tower. It looked a lot like a jail.

“Give me my film back,” said Frank. “I don’t want you to get hassled if they find it. We say we’re tourists on the Silk Road. We like to take pictures. Don’t mention your father.”

“What’s the problem? That’s mostly true,” I said.

“If there is something going on with the election, they won’t want journalists or politicians’ daughters in there.”

“Why didn’t we think about the election before we decided to come here?” I said.

“They just called it,” Nate said.

“Get some cash out of your wallet now in case they want money,” Frank said. “Don’t let them see how much you have.”

“What will we say about the driver?” I put fifty dollars in my jeans pocket.

“That he attacked us!” Frank said.

“Wait,” Nate said. “You have our list of numbers, right? Let’s memorize the number of the ambassador.”

“Let’s make up a way to remember it,” I said.

“Can’t you just fucking remember it?” Frank said.

I had never seen Frank scared like this. Now I wished we’d gone back to the Chinese border station instead, where Frank could speak Mandarin. In Kyrgyzstan, educated people spoke Russian, not English. We didn’t know who had killed whom in the civil wars here after the U.S.S.R. fell in 1991, or who hated whom now. We didn’t know what they ate, what they were proud of, whether they rolled their R’s.

Soldiers with Kalashnikovs guarded the gates. Frank spoke to them in Mandarin, but they responded in Russian. He shook his head. He hated to be helpless.



The burly guards had light blue eyes, which, we'd been told, had come from Alexander the Great, who had "raped their mothers." One of them was an especially unusual mixture of Caucasian coloring, pale skin and blonde hair, with broad, Mongolian cheekbones and wide-set light eyes. He was striking, even glamorous.

"English?" Nate said.

"English, OK," the handsome man said, "passports."

He looked back and forth from us to our photos and through every page of our passports. Nate was Jewish and had been to Israel several times. I knew he was worried about the stamps.

"Miss Elizabeth Moore," the guard said. "Whose wife?"

"She's with me," Frank said.

"Mine," Nate said at the same time.

"Neither?" the guard said.

The guard could see we were rattled. "Miss, come with me."

"She's not going with you," Frank said.

"We must ask some questions."

"Is there a problem?" Nate said.

"How did you get here?" the guard said.

"You saw us," Frank said. "We walked."

"We will ask you some questions and see if there is a problem."

"You are not going to ask her anything," Frank said.

“It’s fine,” I said before Frank could say more. We were at a border, and it was normal to be questioned.

They put us in separate rooms. Nate was across the hall from me.

“Sit, please, Elizabeth,” he said, closing the door. “You may call me Alexei. You came in a truck, yes?”

“We tried,” I said, “but the truck got in an accident, and then we walked.”

“Accident?”

“Yes. The driver was on drugs and he hit his face on the steering wheel. He needs help.”

“My friend,” Alexie said, “my pretty little friend, that is not what the driver says. He is with the Chinese. He says the man kicked his seat and tried to kill him and stole his money, one thousand US dollars.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes,” he said, “I think we search your bags and find the money.”

“You’d find our money.”

“I see. You are rich Americans.”

“No!”

“Are you OK?” Nate yelled from across the hall.

“No,” Alexie said, “you have a big problem.”

“We’re just tourists. The truck driver was crazy. He pulled a knife on us.” I waved my hand around, stabbing at the air. “See? A knife.”

He leaned back in his chair. “I don’t see,” he said.

I tried to remember the phone number.

“It was the Jew, wasn’t it? The Jew attacked him because driver is Muslim.”

I didn’t want Nate to hear us. I lowered my voice. “No. The driver attacked us because we tried to take a picture of him. All we did was take a picture. Then he tried to stab my leg, here, with his knife.”

Alexei didn’t look Muslim, but I didn’t know much about the ethnicities there. He wore a wedding ring. He was clean-shaven. He looked about thirty years old.

A guard spoke through the door in Russian, loud, cruel syllables.

“He says your friend has many cameras.” Alexei shook his head, as if he were sorry to hear it. “It is illegal for journalists to enter without permits.”

“I’m not a journalist. We’re tourists. He just likes to take pictures.”

“You are with an illegal journalist and a violent Jew. I think you must be guilty of something,” he said. “What is it? You are a prostitute?”

“No.”

“Why do you travel with two men?”

“They’re my friends.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m not a prostitute.”

“Too bad,” he said. “You are in trouble. And there’s not much else you can do.”

“Do you want money?”

“No.” He squeezed my shoulders as he walked out of the room. “I am locking the door for your safety.”

When he closed the door behind him I tried to steady myself by breathing. But I was trembling, gripping the arms of the chair. He didn’t want money.

I looked for a phone, but there wasn’t one in the office. I heard Alexei across the hall talking to Nate.

“Why did you come here? You want to hold Kalashnikov? You want to fire Russian guns?”

I couldn’t hear Nate’s reply.

“What do you want? You want our women?”

I heard Nate wheezing, like he’d been punched in the stomach.

I didn’t have many choices. The obvious, the proper thing to do was to resist him. Even if I couldn’t physically resist him, if I at least tried to, then I would be the victim, and it wouldn’t be my fault, and Frank and Nate would feel bad for me. I could scream for help. But the only people who would want to help me were locked up too, so they would have to listen. What would they hear? A girl who needed help. A girl who didn’t have the power, or ability, or the cunning to help herself. A girl who had been a sexual object to both of them now being the sexual object of someone else.

I didn't know why Nate had stopped showing interest in me once we'd arrived in China, but I blamed Frank, which might have been unfair, but I was still angry at Frank for hurting me when he'd been my boyfriend, and now I thought he was keeping Nate from me, too. I was also upset by how Frank had taunted me with the Bangkok story the night before. So even though I was scared, even though Nate was already hurt, what I wanted in that room was to not be made helpless, to not be prude. I cared less about protecting my body than my ego.

I decided I would do something unconventional, something beyond Frank's understanding of me, something that made me the protagonist, something that took guts and prowess. I would do something that men wanted badly, something that both scared and empowered women. I wanted to control the situation by being a person who acts, a person who is not submissive.

As the road ascended into the thin, cold air of the Tibetan plateau, we saw the curvature of the Earth drop behind the steppes we'd crossed in the past weeks, a sea of dark violet tundra. I was with my ex-boyfriend Frank and our friend Nate, hitch-hiking to Central Asia. We rode in open truck beds amid swiveling barber chairs, bolts of brocaded silk, crates of white Hetian jade and burlap bags of elephant garlic, all bound for export. Our single-track road was made narrower by road workers' tents which clung onto steep mountainsides like fungi. Had there been any vultures that high they would have feasted on the piglet carcasses discarded by the laborers.

On the high passes we shivered in our sleeping bags and breathed in the spectral clouds. I was so happy to be out there. In that cloudscape we were part of the swirling sky, and it was easy to believe in astral travel. Tibet was like that: it appeared to be desolate, unless you were capable of believing in Buddhism, which storied the plateau with roving, ancient atmans. Alpine lakes shone like lapis lazuli, unexpected luminosity that hummed with the dreams of bodhistavas who lay sleeping under the surface.

The only other girls I saw were prostitutes who hung around army checkpoints and nuns on pilgrimages to Mt. Kailash. The nuns strapped wooden blocks onto their hands to protect their palms as they prostrated every one-hundred-and-eighth step. The prostitutes sat back to back at crossroads, asleep, their long, dirty hair tangling together.

On windy nights the makeshift trucker huts where we slept sang like Theremins conducted from the sky, and sometimes the tarp ceilings blew off, exposing us to the icy, minatory moon. The truckers explained that the wrathful deity White Brahma Buddha was up there slashing the darkness with his sword, protecting the nomads' yaks from the silent snow leopards that crept around us. In the thin air I dreamt of drowning.

Frank worked as a photographer in Beijing, and we were out there because he'd been hired for a series on migrant workers in China's frontier. Frank had invited Nate and then Nate invited me. At home in New York I thought that Nate was interested in me, but since we'd arrived in China his attention had drifted. I didn't know why. I looked for affection in everything they each did.

When Frank introduced me as his wife so truckers wouldn't assume I was for hire, I felt like I was in love with him again, as if he were proposing. But Frank would never propose. His heart orbited around a black hole of independence at the expense of everything else. That's why we'd broken up. When you love someone who privileges freedom above all else, who suspects you of trying to shrink his world, not expand it, you have two choices: prove to him that love is not possession, or prove that you don't want to possess him. I tried both, but honoring his fears at the expense of mine brought me so much pain, and when he saw how much his ambivalent love hurt me, it confirmed to him that he'd rather be alone. His preferred state was exile, a mode of living by spontaneity, which was like carrying a gun, every moment heightened with the potential for heroism and death.

The thing about Frank is that if you could keep up with him, you got to share in the thrill of his devouring of the world. Like me, he believed the grandeur of his environment could stretch the possibilities of his mind, but, unlike me, he'd deliberately made his life into a search for these landscapes. His photographs were proof that the world he wanted to exist could, but you had to seek it and you had to frame it by your own vision. His photographs made me want to sneak out in the night and jump onto trains and swim in clear rivers and hold your hands out to bonfires. He shot straight into light for the prisms, blind spots, and the blown-out whiteness of ecstasy. He shot the road workers' velvet slippers embossed with the Playboy bunny, and the golden calves of reclining Buddhas, and the sparkling quartz and mica of gneissic cliff faces that belied seismic catastrophes. As my boyfriend, he'd also taken so many portraits of me: of my

collar bones under water, of the profile of my sleeping face on his bare chest, of my hair blowing wildly on mountain passes, of my dirty hands offering him coffee, of his palm on my wind-burned, happy cheek. I wanted to be the person I looked like in his photographs. But that person's existence depended on Frank's existence.

After five weeks crossing the plateau we were hungry for food that wasn't instant noodles, thirsty for oxygen, bruised from the bumpy roads, and red from the sun, which glared off the snowpack, burning our necks and eyeballs and chapping our lips and hands. We planned to rest in Kashgar, the palm-treed oasis town that marked the end of the plateau and our descent into the desert, for a few days before our visas expired and we crossed into Kyrgyzstan.

We checked into a hotel in Kashgar — mattresses, coffee that wasn't Nescafe, hot water — and ate in a night bazaar lit by smoky kerosene lamps. Lamb heads and chicken feet hung as advertisements from the vendors' carts. Men tossed noodle dough into long strips like jump ropes. I bought almonds, cinnamon cakes, and figs. With great pleasure we deliberated the next days' meals over over cold Tsingtao beer. Frank was drunk and trying to convince Nate to go to a strip club with him. I thought it was a show Frank was putting on for me, baiting me to object.

"I'm not going," Nate said, "not in a Muslim city."

"But, it's still China. This is what businessmen do here. It's normal. It's like Bangkok."

"You're not businessmen," I said.



“It doesn’t feel like Bangkok,” Nate said. There were two-humped camels in the street, bearded men in skullcaps embroidered with crescent moons, and watchful women in knotted burkhas.

“Well, it won’t be a ping-pong show, but I still think we should go.”

“Ping-pong show?” I said. I fell for it.

“The chicks shoot the ping-pong balls out like an air gun,” Frank said. “Their muscles are so strong. You can *feel* it.”

“How do you know what it feels like?” I said.

“What’s it to you? It’s legal.”

“You aren’t supposed to tell her that!” Nate said.

“You paid for it?”

“It’s normal there,” Frank said. “It’s an entire industry.” Frank and I had been dating when they went on that trip to Thailand, and I didn’t know if he’d forgotten that, or if he was being cruel.

“It was a long time ago,” Nate said, “and we just did it once.”

“Maybe you did,” Frank said. “Besides, it’s a good-paying job for them.”

“Don’t act like you’re doing them a favor,” I said.

“You don’t know anything about it,” Frank said. “Don’t be such a prude.”

Even though Frank had lost his virginity to me in high school, and we’d had sex many times, he still called me that. I wasn’t going to argue with him about it in front of Nate, but it hurt

my feelings. He acted like he knew everything about sex and I knew nothing. I didn't like the way he talked about women, but I didn't like being left out either. Nate would laugh. I couldn't. I felt defeated by it.

On the way into our hotel bar we stopped at the front desk to ask about the Kyrgyz border crossing.

"Border closes tomorrow," the man said. "Maybe one week closed."

"Can we cross tomorrow?" Frank asked.

"I advise leave now," he said.

"Now?" It was one in the morning.

"Problems at the border, sir," he said.

"What do you think?" Nate asked, his cigarette hanging from his mouth, his green eyes bright against his new, dark beard. His flannel shirt was covered in dust and his jeans had streaks of engine grease across the thighs. Still, I wanted to put my head against his chest. I wanted him to put his dirty arms around me. I wanted to make Frank shut up.

"I have to get the exit stamp," Frank said. In order to live legally in Beijing, he had to leave the country every three months. He had three days left on his visa.

"OK, Elizabeth?" Nate said.

"Fine," I said. It wasn't fine. I wanted privacy to think about Frank and the prostitute.

"We'll take a taxi in thirty minutes," Frank said.

“They’re closing the border because of an election,” Nate said as we walked to our rooms.

“In Kyrgyzstan?” I said.

“They’re expecting riots.”

“Says who?” Frank said.

“State department website.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t go?” I said.

“You know I can’t afford to have problems with my papers,” Frank said.

“The riots will probably just be in the capital,” Nate said.

“So why would they close the border?”

“We have to go,” Frank said to me. “I’ll go deal with the bill. Try not to take such a long time packing.” He went downstairs with his bag.

“What do you know about the election?” I asked Nate.

“I can’t even pronounce the parties’ names. One’s Islamist and the other’s old Soviets.”

“Don’t you think that sounds worse than paperwork problems here?”

“Frank has to get his stamp,” he said, “and I want to see the Pamir Highway. Come on, it’s supposed to be the most beautiful road in the world. We’re so close.”

There had been many times on the trip when I thought we were doing something too risky, like traveling without the required guides and permits into China’s disputed regions, or hitching rides with truckers burnt out on speed. I was tired of being the one who was afraid of

everything. I was also mad at Frank for calling me prude, which beyond the sexual insult was what he was always criticizing me for: I was too timid. I was too sheltered. I was too passive. One of the reasons I'd come on this trip was because I wanted to be as unflinching as he was. I clenched my fists so my nails dug into my palms and said to myself, don't make them regret bringing you.

Downstairs they were squatting around a mah-jongg game with the driver. We bought cold beer and a carton of Gauloises to barter with and took off into the desert in the taxi. The highway soon deteriorated into a dirt track, and when we pulled over to let someone pass, the somnolent smell of sage from under our tires saturated the night air. The taxi driver turned off the headlights to make his car stereo louder and played a Bollywood musical we'd heard all over China, and he loved that we knew the words. We offered him beer, and even though he was Muslim he drank with us. The guys cranked down the windows and stuck their heads out, looking for oncoming traffic, or looking at the sky, which touched down on the desert all around us like a black, silky parachute.

To our right the tundra extended north onto the Mongolian steppe. Unseen, far off on our left, were the Himalayas, holy white peaks in the sky. We sang and drank and smoked. I leaned against Nate's shoulder. This road was developed a century before Christ, when Chinese traded silk for Fergana horses so tough they were said to sweat blood. For hundreds of years caravanserais and cities rose from the sand only because China guarded the secret of silk production—the silk worm.

When I looked into the dark desert I imagined the astronomers who'd made their camps there, tracing the night sky with gold dust to make illuminated manuscripts for their khanates. Riderless donkeys had led thousand-camel caravans loaded with sesame seeds, figs, and magnetic compasses east in return for the bolts of silk that went west, much of it bound for insatiable consumers in Rome. Sutra-seeking pilgrims gathered at these oases, relaying the news that the prince Siddhartha Gautama had escaped samsara, the cycle of suffering. This exchange of goods, peoples, and ideas continued for six-hundred years, until a scorned princess smuggled silk worms out of China in her coiffure. I looked into the emptiness, knowing that the religions, the warriors, the women, and the empires that made our world had once considered this desert its center.

I wanted legends. I wanted exotica. I wanted to be like those heroes from history, traders and explorers, astute and adventurous, and different from everyone who stayed home. I wanted to see the next place and the next place. I was twenty-three. I was out there for moments like these, when I was wide-awake, sustained by anticipation.

The road ended at the border station, a squat concrete building demarcating the end of the Far East. A crowd of women waving maos closed in on the taxi as we slowed. They wore long skirts and their heads were covered in floral scarves that looked like tablecloth scraps. They weren't Chinese. Their cheeks were wider, their eyes like almonds.

"They want to shop in Kashgar," Frank translated as the driver spoke, "before the border closes. They're Kyrgyz."

As we pushed through the women to get our bags from the trunk, their desperation to take our seats scared me. The taxi left us, and before the driver killed its lights, I saw the women's arms throwing our beer bottles out the window.

"Do you think they'll ask about my dad?" I said. My father had been a U.S. Senator since I was eleven. Nate and Frank knew not to bring him up, and I hadn't met anybody who asked about him yet. But this was our first border crossing. We didn't know if he would help or endanger us out here. I'd refused to carry a diplomatic passport. The only thing I had was a list of phone numbers to call in an emergency.

"I don't think you should say anything," Frank said. "I'll talk."

"But don't lie if they ask you," Nate said.

Few people spoke English well enough to talk to me without going through Frank, so I wasn't worried about being confronted. I doubted the border guards would recognize my name, Elizabeth Austen Moore, and even if they did, I trusted Frank to handle it.

To make the border crossing we needed to get through this Chinese post with tourist exit stamps, as opposed to press corps stamps, and then clear the Kyrgyz customs on the other side. We divvied Frank's camera gear between us so he wouldn't look like a journalist.

"Don't leave me alone," I said to Frank.

"You've got the rest of my film," he said. "I won't."

We went together to speak to the Han guard. He copied our names into a ledger and asked us to sign. I loved seeing our names in that book, neat block letters amid Cyrillic curves and Mandarin characters.

“He says it’s ten kilometers of demilitarized road to the Kyrgyz border station. We have to hitch with one of these truckers,” Frank said. The guard wrote the exit date on the visas in our passports and didn’t ask to search the bags or about my name.

“Demilitarized?” I said.

“Welcome to the U.S.S.R.,” Nate said. He was thrilled. We were entering the outposts of the former Russian empire. We didn’t know anybody else who’d been there.

The sun was rising behind us. It wasn’t a soft light, wasn’t romantic or pink. The atmosphere was so clear and the distances around us so vast that the cold dawn lit us like a harsh halogen bulb switched on in the middle of the night, tingeing our faces in an electromotive green.

Frank pointed to a truck painted in a technicolor lattice pattern and a mural of a Pakistani Airlines jet over the Hindu Kush. Dozens of small brass bells hung from the bumper, and flashing rope lights looped around the back. A young man in an Air Jordan t-shirt sang along to pop music as he cleaned his windshield. Frank wanted to photograph him. The trucker showed his truck off to Frank, who was so excited he forgot not to look like a journalist, setting up his tripod and walking around the truck with his light meter.

The trucker agreed to take us to the Kyrgyz border station for about five bucks, though there was barely room for us. The front seat was taken up by a bedroll, blankets, and clothes,

which I sat on. Coins and whirligigs hung from the ceiling on ribbons. He made us take off our shoes, and the guys' feet stank up the cab. They crawled to the space behind the front seats and sat on boxes of radishes. We drove slowly, the driver yelling over the music and grating engine. I could tell he was asking Frank about me.

"Meiyou, meiyou," Frank said, which means no, not possible.

"He has track marks," I said, looking at his bruised, thin arms. His teeth and gums were stained black from chewing betel.

We'd driven about five kilometers, halfway, when Frank pulled out his camera. The driver watched him in the rearview mirror. Even though Frank had already taken dozens of photographs of him in the lot, now the driver waved his arms and shook his head.

"Something's wrong with him," Frank said. "He's slurring." Frank apologized, but before he put his camera away we all heard the click of the shutter.

The driver turned to Frank, black spit dripping down his chin. Frank yelled at him, pointing at the road. It was as if the man forgot he was driving. He pulled a knife from under his seat. There was so little space in the cab that we couldn't back away from him. Frank tried to calm him, but he wasn't listening.

There weren't any doors in the back where they were sitting. "Open the door, Elizabeth," Nate said. "Jump out!"

"Too fast," I said. I had my hands on the ceiling, caught up in the ribbons and clinking medallions, trying to protect my head as we bounced over deep ruts.



Nate kicked at the driver's seat, jiggling it back and forth, trying to break the man's angry trance. The driver stabbed his knife into the pile of bedding between us. The way the blade sunk into the thick wool blanket terrified me. I was as close as I could get to the door.

"Don't touch her!" Nate yelled, kicking harder. The driver's seat wasn't locked into place, and it sprang forward. His face hit the steering wheel, and we went off the road as he lay limp over the wheel. I jumped out. I tried to roll when I hit the ground but really just lay there where I landed. The truck stopped in the sandy soil.

"Are you hurt?" Nate said.

"No," I said, but I didn't get up. He put his hand on my head, as if he were checking to see if I had a fever. I stared up at him. I wanted to stay like that.

"What's wrong with her?" Frank said.

"Nothing." Nate pulled me up and hugged my face into his chest and kissed my forehead.

"Is the driver hurt?" I said.

Nate went to check.

"Don't get too close," I said.

"What are we going to do about it if he is hurt?" Frank said.

"There's blood coming out of his nose," Nate said.

"Should we wait for the next truck?"

"I am not getting in another truck," Frank said. "Let's start walking."

"We can't leave him," I said.

“He’s breathing,” Nate said. “We’ll tell the first person we see. What can we do for him? He still has that knife in his hand.” Nate pulled our shoes and bags out of the cab.

I looked in from the passenger side. I didn’t think we should leave him.

“What was he saying?” Nate asked.

“I don’t know,” Frank said. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Nate and I looked at each other, surprised at the panic in Frank’s voice. I didn’t have a good argument for staying. We were afraid to get within arm’s length of him. We decided to wave down the first car we saw and explain what had happened. We put on our backpacks and walked to the road. It was hilly enough that we couldn’t see far in front of us. We walked west, towards Kyrgyzstan.

It got hot fast out there, and my adrenaline faded. We stopped at an abandoned truck alongside the road, its wheels deep in the sand. The wooden truck bed had exploded from being overpacked with garlic that must have swelled in the sun. Garlic cloves piled like drip castles underneath the splits in the siding. We sat on our bags in the pungent shade of the truck.

“We’re protected from vampires,” I said.

“Yetis are our real problem out here,” Nate said, “and cracked-out drivers.”

“I’m worried about him.”

“He was probably shooting up before we got in,” Frank said, “and now he’s passed out.”

“He’s not passed out,” I said. “He’s hurt.” I knew Frank was acting like this because he felt guilty about taking that last photograph. We were in a no-man’s-land between the Chinese and Kyrgyz governments. It was a bad place for anyone to be hurt.

We saw a car coming from the China side. Frank walked to the road to wave it down. Kyrgyz women were crammed into the back seats. The women were pointing at us, their white fingertips pressed against the window. They didn’t stop.

“What was that?” Nate said.

“Let’s keep walking,” I said. “I don’t like being trapped in here.”

“Frank, why wouldn’t they stop?” Nate said.

“I don’t know.”

I was worried for him. Frank was the one with the most to lose if we got in trouble with China. He had been hired by a German newspaper to photograph the next year’s Olympics, and he intended to stay in Beijing a long time. He was so proud of his fluency; he’d done all the necessary negotiating on the road for us, ordered all our food, translated the truckers’ stories. He brought Mandarin workbooks with him to improve his vocabulary, and he asked lots of questions of people we met, always trying to understand the language and the people better. But, he had a bad temper and could be callous about important things, like if we were responsible for the driver.

“They’re just looking at us because we’re weird,” I said.

“Speak for yourself,” Frank said.

“You’re the weirdest thing out here,” I said. I wanted to make them laugh. “Those fucking pants.” Frank wore fake North Face cargo pants that unzipped at the knee. He said he needed all the pockets for his camera gear.

“At least I know how to rub my sunscreen in so I don’t have ghost face,” Frank said.

“Will you two shut up?” Nate said.

We walked on. Frank kept looking behind us, as if the driver was going to jump on his back.

“I think he’s fine, Frank,” Nate said. “He’s probably passed out, like you said.”

“What do you know?” Frank said.

“We’re here,” I said. We looked down on glass shards gleaming along a concrete wall surrounding the border station. There was a barbed-wire perimeter and a guard tower. It looked a lot like a jail.

“Give me my film back,” said Frank. “I don’t want you to get hassled if they find it. We say we’re tourists on the Silk Road. We like to take pictures. Don’t mention your father.”

“What’s the problem? That’s mostly true,” I said.

“If there is something going on with the election, they won’t want journalists or politicians’ daughters in there.”

“Why didn’t we think about the election before we decided to come here?” I said.

“They just called it,” Nate said.

“Get some cash out of your wallet now in case they want money,” Frank said. “Don’t let them see how much you have.”

“What will we say about the driver?” I put fifty dollars in my jeans pocket.

“That he attacked us!” Frank said.

“Wait,” Nate said. “You have our list of numbers, right? Let’s memorize the number of the ambassador.”

“Let’s make up a way to remember it,” I said.

“Can’t you just fucking remember it?” Frank said.

I had never seen Frank scared like this. Now I wished we’d gone back to the Chinese border station instead, where Frank could speak Mandarin. In Kyrgyzstan, educated people spoke Russian, not English. We didn’t know who had killed whom in the civil wars here after the U.S.S.R. fell in 1991, or who hated whom now. We didn’t know what they ate, what they were proud of, whether they rolled their R’s.

Soldiers with Kalashnikovs guarded the gates. Frank spoke to them in Mandarin, but they responded in Russian. He shook his head. He hated to be helpless.

The burly guards had light blue eyes, which, we’d been told, had come from Alexander the Great, who had “raped their mothers.” One of them was an especially unusual mixture of Caucasian coloring, pale skin and blonde hair, with broad, Mongolian cheekbones and wide-set light eyes. He was striking, even glamorous.

“English?” Nate said.

“English, OK,” the handsome man said, “passports.”

He looked back and forth from us to our photos and through every page of our passports.

Nate was Jewish and had been to Israel several times. I knew he was worried about the stamps.

“Miss Elizabeth Moore,” the guard said. “Whose wife?”

“She’s with me,” Frank said.

“Mine,” Nate said at the same time.

“Neither?” the guard said.

The guard could see we were rattled. “Miss, come with me.”

“She’s not going with you,” Frank said.

“We must ask some questions.”

“Is there a problem?” Nate said.

“How did you get here?” the guard said.

“You saw us,” Frank said. “We walked.”

“We will ask you some questions and see if there is a problem.”

“You are not going to ask her anything,” Frank said.

“It’s fine,” I said before Frank could say more. We were at a border, and it was normal to be questioned.

They put us in separate rooms. Nate was across the hall from me.

“Sit, please, Elizabeth,” he said, closing the door. “You may call me Alexei. You came in a truck, yes?”

“We tried,” I said, “but the truck got in an accident, and then we walked.”

“Accident?”

“Yes. The driver was on drugs and he hit his face on the steering wheel. He needs help.”

“My friend,” Alexie said, “my pretty little friend, that is not what the driver says. He is with the Chinese. He says the man kicked his seat and tried to kill him and stole his money, one thousand US dollars.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes,” he said, “I think we search your bags and find the money.”

“You’d find our money.”

“I see. You are rich Americans.”

“No!”

“Are you OK?” Nate yelled from across the hall.

“No,” Alexie said, “you have a big problem.”

“We’re just tourists. The truck driver was crazy. He pulled a knife on us.” I waved my hand around, stabbing at the air. “See? A knife.”

He leaned back in his chair. “I don’t see,” he said.

I tried to remember the phone number.

“It was the Jew, wasn’t it? The Jew attacked him because driver is Muslim.”

I didn't want Nate to hear us. I lowered my voice. "No. The driver attacked us because we tried to take a picture of him. All we did was take a picture. Then he tried to stab my leg, here, with his knife."

Alexei didn't look Muslim, but I didn't know much about the ethnicities there. He wore a wedding ring. He was clean-shaven. He looked about thirty years old.

A guard spoke through the door in Russian, loud, cruel syllables.

"He says your friend has many cameras." Alexei shook his head, as if he were sorry to hear it. "It is illegal for journalists to enter without permits."

"I'm not a journalist. We're tourists. He just likes to take pictures."

"You are with an illegal journalist and a violent Jew. I think you must be guilty of something," he said. "What is it? You are a prostitute?"

"No."

"Why do you travel with two men?"

"They're my friends."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm not a prostitute."

"Too bad," he said. "You are in trouble. And there's not much else you can do."

"Do you want money?"

"No." He squeezed my shoulders as he walked out of the room. "I am locking the door for your safety."



When he closed the door behind him I tried to steady myself by breathing. But I was trembling, gripping the arms of the chair. He didn't want money.

I looked for a phone, but there wasn't one in the office. I heard Alexei across the hall talking to Nate.

“Why did you come here? You want to hold Kalashnikov? You want to fire Russian guns?”

I couldn't hear Nate's reply.

“What do you want? You want our women?”

I heard Nate wheezing, like he'd been punched in the stomach.

I didn't have many choices. The obvious, the proper thing to do was to resist him. Even if I couldn't physically resist him, if I at least tried to, then I would be the victim, and it wouldn't be my fault, and Frank and Nate would feel bad for me. I could scream for help. But the only people who would want to help me were locked up too, so they would have to listen. What would they hear? A girl who needed help. A girl who didn't have the power, or ability, or the cunning to help herself. A girl who had been a sexual object to both of them now being the sexual object of someone else.

I didn't know why Nate had stopped showing interest in me once we'd arrived in China, but I blamed Frank, which might have been unfair, but I was still angry at Frank for hurting me when he'd been my boyfriend, and now I thought he was keeping Nate from me, too. I was also upset by how Frank had taunted me with the Bangkok story the night before. So even though I

was scared, even though Nate was already hurt, what I wanted in that room was to not be made helpless, to not be prude. I cared less about protecting my body than my ego.

I decided I would do something unconventional, something beyond Frank's understanding of me, something that made me the protagonist, something that took guts and prowess. I would do something that men wanted badly, something that both scared and empowered women. I wanted to control the situation by being a person who acts, a person who is not submissive.

As the road ascended into the thin, cold air of the Tibetan plateau, we saw the curvature of the Earth drop behind the steppes we'd crossed in the past weeks, a sea of dark violet tundra. I was with my ex-boyfriend Frank and our friend Nate, hitch-hiking to Central Asia. We rode in open truck beds amid swiveling barber chairs, bolts of brocaded silk, crates of white Hetian jade and burlap bags of elephant garlic, all bound for export. Our single-track road was made narrower by road workers' tents which clung onto steep mountainsides like fungi. Had there been any vultures that high they would have feasted on the piglet carcasses discarded by the laborers.

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When Frank introduced me as his wife so truckers wouldn't assume I was for hire, I felt like I was in love with him again, as if he were proposing. But Frank would never propose. His heart orbited around a black hole of independence at the expense of everything else. That's why we'd broken up. When you love someone who privileges freedom above all else, who suspects

you of trying to shrink his world, not expand it, you have two choices: prove to him that love is not possession, or prove that you don't want to possess him. I tried both, but honoring his fears at the expense of mine brought me so much pain, and when he saw how much his ambivalent love hurt me, it confirmed to him that he'd rather be alone. His preferred state was exile, a mode of living by spontaneity, which was like carrying a gun, every moment heightened with the potential for heroism and death.

The thing about Frank is that if you could keep up with him, you got to share in the thrill of his devouring of the world. Like me, he believed the grandeur of his environment could stretch the possibilities of his mind, but, unlike me, he'd deliberately made his life into a search for these landscapes. His photographs were proof that the world he wanted to exist could, but you had to seek it and you had to frame it by your own vision. His photographs made me want to sneak out in the night and jump onto trains and swim in clear rivers and hold your hands out to bonfires. He shot straight into light for the prisms, blind spots, and the blown-out whiteness of ecstasy. He shot the road workers' velvet slippers embossed with the Playboy bunny, and the golden calves of reclining Buddhas, and the sparkling quartz and mica of gneissic cliff faces that belied seismic catastrophes. As my boyfriend, he'd also taken so many portraits of me: of my collar bones under water, of the profile of my sleeping face on his bare chest, of my hair blowing wildly on mountain passes, of my dirty hands offering him coffee, of his palm on my wind-burned, happy cheek. I wanted to be the person I looked like in his photographs. But that person's existence depended on Frank's existence.

After five weeks crossing the plateau we were hungry for food that wasn't instant noodles, thirsty for oxygen, bruised from the bumpy roads, and red from the sun, which glared off the snowpack, burning our necks and eyeballs and chapping our lips and hands. We planned to rest in Kashgar, the palm-treed oasis town that marked the end of the plateau and our descent into the desert, for a few days before our visas expired and we crossed into Kyrgyzstan.

We checked into a hotel in Kashgar — mattresses, coffee that wasn't Nescafe, hot water — and ate in a night bazaar lit by smoky kerosene lamps. Lamb heads and chicken feet hung as advertisements from the vendors' carts. Men tossed noodle dough into long strips like jump ropes. I bought almonds, cinnamon cakes, and figs. With great pleasure we deliberated the next days' meals over over cold Tsingtao beer. Frank was drunk and trying to convince Nate to go to a strip club with him. I thought it was a show Frank was putting on for me, baiting me to object.

"I'm not going," Nate said, "not in a Muslim city."

"But, it's still China. This is what businessmen do here. It's normal. It's like Bangkok."

"You're not businessmen," I said.

"It doesn't feel like Bangkok," Nate said. There were two-humped camels in the street, bearded men in skullcaps embroidered with crescent moons, and watchful women in knotted burkhas.

"Well, it won't be a ping-pong show, but I still think we should go."

"Ping-pong show?" I said. I fell for it.

“The chicks shoot the ping-pong balls out like an air gun,” Frank said. “Their muscles are so strong. You can *feel* it.”

“How do you know what it feels like?” I said.

“What’s it to you? It’s legal.”

“You aren’t supposed to tell her that!” Nate said.

“You paid for it?”

“It’s normal there,” Frank said. “It’s an entire industry.” Frank and I had been dating when they went on that trip to Thailand, and I didn’t know if he’d forgotten that, or if he was being cruel.

“It was a long time ago,” Nate said, “and we just did it once.”

“Maybe you did,” Frank said. “Besides, it’s a good-paying job for them.”

“Don’t act like you’re doing them a favor,” I said.

“You don’t know anything about it,” Frank said. “Don’t be such a prude.”

Even though Frank had lost his virginity to me in high school, and we’d had sex many times, he still called me that. I wasn’t going to argue with him about it in front of Nate, but it hurt my feelings. He acted like he knew everything about sex and I knew nothing. I didn’t like the way he talked about women, but I didn’t like being left out either. Nate would laugh. I couldn’t. I felt defeated by it.

On the way into our hotel bar we stopped at the front desk to ask about the Kyrgyz border crossing.

“Border closes tomorrow,” the man said. “Maybe one week closed.”

“Can we cross tomorrow?” Frank asked.

“I advise leave now,” he said.

“Now?” It was one in the morning.

“Problems at the border, sir,” he said.

“What do you think?” Nate asked, his cigarette hanging from his mouth, his green eyes bright against his new, dark beard. His flannel shirt was covered in dust and his jeans had streaks of engine grease across the thighs. Still, I wanted to put my head against his chest. I wanted him to put his dirty arms around me. I wanted to make Frank shut up.

“I have to get the exit stamp,” Frank said. In order to live legally in Beijing, he had to leave the country every three months. He had three days left on his visa.

“OK, Elizabeth?” Nate said.

“Fine,” I said. It wasn’t fine. I wanted privacy to think about Frank and the prostitute.

“We’ll take a taxi in thirty minutes,” Frank said.

“They’re closing the border because of an election,” Nate said as we walked to our rooms.

“In Kyrgyzstan?” I said.

“They’re expecting riots.”

“Says who?” Frank said.

“State department website.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t go?” I said.

“You know I can’t afford to have problems with my papers,” Frank said.

“The riots will probably just be in the capital,” Nate said.

“So why would they close the border?”

“We have to go,” Frank said to me. “I’ll go deal with the bill. Try not to take such a long time packing.” He went downstairs with his bag.

“What do you know about the election?” I asked Nate.

“I can’t even pronounce the parties’ names. One’s Islamist and the other’s old Soviets.”

“Don’t you think that sounds worse than paperwork problems here?”

“Frank has to get his stamp,” he said, “and I want to see the Pamir Highway. Come on, it’s supposed to be the most beautiful road in the world. We’re so close.”

There had been many times on the trip when I thought we were doing something too risky, like traveling without the required guides and permits into China’s disputed regions, or hitching rides with truckers burnt out on speed. I was tired of being the one who was afraid of everything. I was also mad at Frank for calling me prude, which beyond the sexual insult was what he was always criticizing me for: I was too timid. I was too sheltered. I was too passive. One of the reasons I’d come on this trip was because I wanted to be as unflinching as he was. I clenched my fists so my nails dug into my palms and said to myself, don’t make them regret bringing you.



Downstairs they were squatting around a mah-jongg game with the driver. We bought cold beer and a carton of Gauloises to barter with and took off into the desert in the taxi. The highway soon deteriorated into a dirt track, and when we pulled over to let someone pass, the somnolent smell of sage from under our tires saturated the night air. The taxi driver turned off the headlights to make his car stereo louder and played a Bollywood musical we'd heard all over China, and he loved that we knew the words. We offered him beer, and even though he was Muslim he drank with us. The guys cranked down the windows and stuck their heads out, looking for oncoming traffic, or looking at the sky, which touched down on the desert all around us like a black, silky parachute.

To our right the tundra extended north onto the Mongolian steppe. Unseen, far off on our left, were the Himalayas, holy white peaks in the sky. We sang and drank and smoked. I leaned against Nate's shoulder. This road was developed a century before Christ, when Chinese traded silk for Fergana horses so tough they were said to sweat blood. For hundreds of years caravanserais and cities rose from the sand only because China guarded the secret of silk production—the silk worm.

When I looked into the dark desert I imagined the astronomers who'd made their camps there, tracing the night sky with gold dust to make illuminated manuscripts for their khanates. Riderless donkeys had led thousand-camel caravans loaded with sesame seeds, figs, and magnetic compasses east in return for the bolts of silk that went west, much of it bound for insatiable consumers in Rome. Sutra-seeking pilgrims gathered at these oases, relaying the news

that the prince Siddhartha Gautama had escaped samsara, the cycle of suffering. This exchange of goods, peoples, and ideas continued for six-hundred years, until a scorned princess smuggled silk worms out of China in her coiffure. I looked into the emptiness, knowing that the religions, the warriors, the women, and the empires that made our world had once considered this desert its center.

I wanted legends. I wanted exotica. I wanted to be like those heroes from history, traders and explorers, astute and adventurous, and different from everyone who stayed home. I wanted to see the next place and the next place. I was twenty-three. I was out there for moments like these, when I was wide-awake, sustained by anticipation.

The road ended at the border station, a squat concrete building demarcating the end of the Far East. A crowd of women waving maos closed in on the taxi as we slowed. They wore long skirts and their heads were covered in floral scarves that looked like tablecloth scraps. They weren't Chinese. Their cheeks were wider, their eyes like almonds.

"They want to shop in Kashgar," Frank translated as the driver spoke, "before the border closes. They're Kyrgyz."

As we pushed through the women to get our bags from the trunk, their desperation to take our seats scared me. The taxi left us, and before the driver killed its lights, I saw the women's arms throwing our beer bottles out the window.

"Do you think they'll ask about my dad?" I said. My father had been a U.S. Senator since I was eleven. Nate and Frank knew not to bring him up, and I hadn't met anybody who asked

about him yet. But this was our first border crossing. We didn't know if he would help or endanger us out here. I'd refused to carry a diplomatic passport. The only thing I had was a list of phone numbers to call in an emergency.

"I don't think you should say anything," Frank said. "I'll talk."

"But don't lie if they ask you," Nate said.

Few people spoke English well enough to talk to me without going through Frank, so I wasn't worried about being confronted. I doubted the border guards would recognize my name, Elizabeth Austen Moore, and even if they did, I trusted Frank to handle it.

To make the border crossing we needed to get through this Chinese post with tourist exit stamps, as opposed to press corps stamps, and then clear the Kyrgyz customs on the other side. We divvied Frank's camera gear between us so he wouldn't look like a journalist.

"Don't leave me alone," I said to Frank.

"You've got the rest of my film," he said. "I won't."

We went together to speak to the Han guard. He copied our names into a ledger and asked us to sign. I loved seeing our names in that book, neat block letters amid Cyrillic curves and Mandarin characters.

"He says it's ten kilometers of demilitarized road to the Kyrgyz border station. We have to hitch with one of these truckers," Frank said. The guard wrote the exit date on the visas in our passports and didn't ask to search the bags or about my name.

"Demilitarized?" I said.

“Welcome to the U.S.S.R.,” Nate said. He was thrilled. We were entering the outposts of the former Russian empire. We didn’t know anybody else who’d been there.

The sun was rising behind us. It wasn’t a soft light, wasn’t romantic or pink. The atmosphere was so clear and the distances around us so vast that the cold dawn lit us like a harsh halogen bulb switched on in the middle of the night, tingeing our faces in an electromotive green.

Frank pointed to a truck painted in a technicolor lattice pattern and a mural of a Pakistani Airlines jet over the Hindu Kush. Dozens of small brass bells hung from the bumper, and flashing rope lights looped around the back. A young man in an Air Jordan t-shirt sang along to pop music as he cleaned his windshield. Frank wanted to photograph him. The trucker showed his truck off to Frank, who was so excited he forgot not to look like a journalist, setting up his tripod and walking around the truck with his light meter.

The trucker agreed to take us to the Kyrgyz border station for about five bucks, though there was barely room for us. The front seat was taken up by a bedroll, blankets, and clothes, which I sat on. Coins and whirligigs hung from the ceiling on ribbons. He made us take off our shoes, and the guys’ feet stank up the cab. They crawled to the space behind the front seats and sat on boxes of radishes. We drove slowly, the driver yelling over the music and grating engine. I could tell he was asking Frank about me.

“Meiyou, meiyou,” Frank said, which means no, not possible.

“He has track marks,” I said, looking at his bruised, thin arms. His teeth and gums were stained black from chewing betel.

We'd driven about five kilometers, halfway, when Frank pulled out his camera. The driver watched him in the rearview mirror. Even though Frank had already taken dozens of photographs of him in the lot, now the driver waved his arms and shook his head.

"Something's wrong with him," Frank said. "He's slurring." Frank apologized, but before he put his camera away we all heard the click of the shutter.

The driver turned to Frank, black spit dripping down his chin. Frank yelled at him, pointing at the road. It was as if the man forgot he was driving. He pulled a knife from under his seat. There was so little space in the cab that we couldn't back away from him. Frank tried to calm him, but he wasn't listening.

There weren't any doors in the back where they were sitting. "Open the door, Elizabeth," Nate said. "Jump out!"

"Too fast," I said. I had my hands on the ceiling, caught up in the ribbons and clinking medallions, trying to protect my head as we bounced over deep ruts.

Nate kicked at the driver's seat, jiggling it back and forth, trying to break the man's angry trance. The driver stabbed his knife into the pile of bedding between us. The way the blade sunk into the thick wool blanket terrified me. I was as close as I could get to the door.

"Don't touch her!" Nate yelled, kicking harder. The driver's seat wasn't locked into place, and it sprang forward. His face hit the steering wheel, and we went off the road as he lay limp over the wheel. I jumped out. I tried to roll when I hit the ground but really just lay there where I landed. The truck stopped in the sandy soil.

“Are you hurt?” Nate said.

“No,” I said, but I didn’t get up. He put his hand on my head, as if he were checking to see if I had a fever. I stared up at him. I wanted to stay like that.

“What’s wrong with her?” Frank said.

“Nothing.” Nate pulled me up and hugged my face into his chest and kissed my forehead.

“Is the driver hurt?” I said.

Nate went to check.

“Don’t get too close,” I said.

“What are we going to do about it if he is hurt?” Frank said.

“There’s blood coming out of his nose,” Nate said.

“Should we wait for the next truck?”

“I am not getting in another truck,” Frank said. “Let’s start walking.”

“We can’t leave him,” I said.

“He’s breathing,” Nate said. “We’ll tell the first person we see. What can we do for him? He still has that knife in his hand.” Nate pulled our shoes and bags out of the cab.

I looked in from the passenger side. I didn’t think we should leave him.

“What was he saying?” Nate asked.

“I don’t know,” Frank said. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Nate and I looked at each other, surprised at the panic in Frank’s voice. I didn’t have a good argument for staying. We were afraid to get within arm’s length of him. We decided to

wave down the first car we saw and explain what had happened. We put on our backpacks and walked to the road. It was hilly enough that we couldn't see far in front of us. We walked west, towards Kyrgyzstan.

It got hot fast out there, and my adrenaline faded. We stopped at an abandoned truck alongside the road, its wheels deep in the sand. The wooden truck bed had exploded from being overpacked with garlic that must have swelled in the sun. Garlic cloves piled like drip castles underneath the splits in the siding. We sat on our bags in the pungent shade of the truck.

"We're protected from vampires," I said.

"Yetis are our real problem out here," Nate said, "and cracked-out drivers."

"I'm worried about him."

"He was probably shooting up before we got in," Frank said, "and now he's passed out."

"He's not passed out," I said. "He's hurt." I knew Frank was acting like this because he felt guilty about taking that last photograph. We were in a no-man's-land between the Chinese and Kyrgyz governments. It was a bad place for anyone to be hurt.

We saw a car coming from the China side. Frank walked to the road to wave it down. Kyrgyz women were crammed into the back seats. The women were pointing at us, their white fingertips pressed against the window. They didn't stop.

"What was that?" Nate said.

"Let's keep walking," I said. "I don't like being trapped in here."

"Frank, why wouldn't they stop?" Nate said.

“I don’t know.”

I was worried for him. Frank was the one with the most to lose if we got in trouble with China. He had been hired by a German newspaper to photograph the next year’s Olympics, and he intended to stay in Beijing a long time. He was so proud of his fluency; he’d done all the necessary negotiating on the road for us, ordered all our food, translated the truckers’ stories. He brought Mandarin workbooks with him to improve his vocabulary, and he asked lots of questions of people we met, always trying to understand the language and the people better. But, he had a bad temper and could be callous about important things, like if we were responsible for the driver.

“They’re just looking at us because we’re weird,” I said.

“Speak for yourself,” Frank said.

“You’re the weirdest thing out here,” I said. I wanted to make them laugh. “Those fucking pants.” Frank wore fake North Face cargo pants that unzipped at the knee. He said he needed all the pockets for his camera gear.

“At least I know how to rub my sunscreen in so I don’t have ghost face,” Frank said.

“Will you two shut up?” Nate said.

We walked on. Frank kept looking behind us, as if the driver was going to jump on his back.

“I think he’s fine, Frank,” Nate said. “He’s probably passed out, like you said.”

“What do you know?” Frank said.



“We’re here,” I said. We looked down on glass shards gleaming along a concrete wall surrounding the border station. There was a barbed-wire perimeter and a guard tower. It looked a lot like a jail.

“Give me my film back,” said Frank. “I don’t want you to get hassled if they find it. We say we’re tourists on the Silk Road. We like to take pictures. Don’t mention your father.”

“What’s the problem? That’s mostly true,” I said.

“If there is something going on with the election, they won’t want journalists or politicians’ daughters in there.”

“Why didn’t we think about the election before we decided to come here?” I said.

“They just called it,” Nate said.

“Get some cash out of your wallet now in case they want money,” Frank said. “Don’t let them see how much you have.”

“What will we say about the driver?” I put fifty dollars in my jeans pocket.

“That he attacked us!” Frank said.

“Wait,” Nate said. “You have our list of numbers, right? Let’s memorize the number of the ambassador.”

“Let’s make up a way to remember it,” I said.

“Can’t you just fucking remember it?” Frank said.

I had never seen Frank scared like this. Now I wished we’d gone back to the Chinese border station instead, where Frank could speak Mandarin. In Kyrgyzstan, educated people spoke

Russian, not English. We didn't know who had killed whom in the civil wars here after the U.S.S.R. fell in 1991, or who hated whom now. We didn't know what they ate, what they were proud of, whether they rolled their R's.

Soldiers with Kalashnikovs guarded the gates. Frank spoke to them in Mandarin, but they responded in Russian. He shook his head. He hated to be helpless.

The burly guards had light blue eyes, which, we'd been told, had come from Alexander the Great, who had "raped their mothers." One of them was an especially unusual mixture of Caucasian coloring, pale skin and blonde hair, with broad, Mongolian cheekbones and wide-set light eyes. He was striking, even glamorous.

"English?" Nate said.

"English, OK," the handsome man said, "passports."

He looked back and forth from us to our photos and through every page of our passports.

Nate was Jewish and had been to Israel several times. I knew he was worried about the stamps.

"Miss Elizabeth Moore," the guard said. "Whose wife?"

"She's with me," Frank said.

"Mine," Nate said at the same time.

"Neither?" the guard said.

The guard could see we were rattled. "Miss, come with me."

"She's not going with you," Frank said.

"We must ask some questions."

“Is there a problem?” Nate said.

“How did you get here?” the guard said.

“You saw us,” Frank said. “We walked.”

“We will ask you some questions and see if there is a problem.”

“You are not going to ask her anything,” Frank said.

“It’s fine,” I said before Frank could say more. We were at a border, and it was normal to be questioned.

They put us in separate rooms. Nate was across the hall from me.

“Sit, please, Elizabeth,” he said, closing the door. “You may call me Alexei. You came in a truck, yes?”

“We tried,” I said, “but the truck got in an accident, and then we walked.”

“Accident?”

“Yes. The driver was on drugs and he hit his face on the steering wheel. He needs help.”

“My friend,” Alexie said, “my pretty little friend, that is not what the driver says. He is with the Chinese. He says the man kicked his seat and tried to kill him and stole his money, one thousand US dollars.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes,” he said, “I think we search your bags and find the money.”

“You’d find our money.”

“I see. You are rich Americans.”

“No!”

“Are you OK?” Nate yelled from across the hall.

“No,” Alexie said, “you have a big problem.”

“We’re just tourists. The truck driver was crazy. He pulled a knife on us.” I waved my hand around, stabbing at the air. “See? A knife.”

He leaned back in his chair. “I don’t see,” he said.

I tried to remember the phone number.

“It was the Jew, wasn’t it? The Jew attacked him because driver is Muslim.”

I didn’t want Nate to hear us. I lowered my voice. “No. The driver attacked us because we tried to take a picture of him. All we did was take a picture. Then he tried to stab my leg, here, with his knife.”

Alexei didn’t look Muslim, but I didn’t know much about the ethnicities there. He wore a wedding ring. He was clean-shaven. He looked about thirty years old.

A guard spoke through the door in Russian, loud, cruel syllables.

“He says your friend has many cameras.” Alexei shook his head, as if he were sorry to hear it. “It is illegal for journalists to enter without permits.”

“I’m not a journalist. We’re tourists. He just likes to take pictures.”

“You are with an illegal journalist and a violent Jew. I think you must be guilty of something,” he said. “What is it? You are a prostitute?”

“No.”

“Why do you travel with two men?”

“They’re my friends.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m not a prostitute.”

“Too bad,” he said. “You are in trouble. And there’s not much else you can do.”

“Do you want money?”

“No.” He squeezed my shoulders as he walked out of the room. “I am locking the door for your safety.”

When he closed the door behind him I tried to steady myself by breathing. But I was trembling, gripping the arms of the chair. He didn’t want money.

I looked for a phone, but there wasn’t one in the office. I heard Alexei across the hall talking to Nate.

“Why did you come here? You want to hold Kalashnikov? You want to fire Russian guns?”

I couldn’t hear Nate’s reply.

“What do you want? You want our women?”

I heard Nate wheezing, like he’d been punched in the stomach.

I didn’t have many choices. The obvious, the proper thing to do was to resist him. Even if I couldn’t physically resist him, if I at least tried to, then I would be the victim, and it wouldn’t be my fault, and Frank and Nate would feel bad for me. I could scream for help. But the only

people who would want to help me were locked up too, so they would have to listen. What would they hear? A girl who needed help. A girl who didn't have the power, or ability, or the cunning to help herself. A girl who had been a sexual object to both of them now being the sexual object of someone else.

I didn't know why Nate had stopped showing interest in me once we'd arrived in China, but I blamed Frank, which might have been unfair, but I was still angry at Frank for hurting me when he'd been my boyfriend, and now I thought he was keeping Nate from me, too. I was also upset by how Frank had taunted me with the Bangkok story the night before. So even though I was scared, even though Nate was already hurt, what I wanted in that room was to not be made helpless, to not be prude. I cared less about protecting my body than my ego.

I decided I would do something unconventional, something beyond Frank's understanding of me, something that made me the protagonist, something that took guts and prowess. I would do something that men wanted badly, something that both scared and empowered women. I wanted to control the situation by being a person who acts, a person who is not submissive.

As the road ascended into the thin, cold air of the Tibetan plateau, we saw the curvature of the Earth drop behind the steppes we'd crossed in the past weeks, a sea of dark violet tundra. I was with my ex-boyfriend Frank and our friend Nate, hitch-hiking to Central Asia. We rode in open truck beds amid swiveling barber chairs, bolts of brocaded silk, crates of white Hetian jade

and burlap bags of elephant garlic, all bound for export. Our single-track road was made narrower by road workers' tents which clung onto steep mountainsides like fungi. Had there been any vultures that high they would have feasted on the piglet carcasses discarded by the laborers.

On the high passes we shivered in our sleeping bags and breathed in the spectral clouds. I was so happy to be out there. In that cloudscape we were part of the swirling sky, and it was easy to believe in astral travel. Tibet was like that: it appeared to be desolate, unless you were capable of believing in Buddhism, which storied the plateau with roving, ancient atmans. Alpine lakes shone like lapis lazuli, unexpected luminosity that hummed with the dreams of boddhistavas who lay sleeping under the surface.

The only other girls I saw were prostitutes who hung around army checkpoints and nuns on pilgrimages to Mt. Kailash. The nuns strapped wooden blocks onto their hands to protect their palms as they prostrated every one-hundred-and-eighth step. The prostitutes sat back to back at crossroads, asleep, their long, dirty hair tangling together.

On windy nights the makeshift trucker huts where we slept sang like Theremins conducted from the sky, and sometimes the tarp ceilings blew off, exposing us to the icy, minatory moon. The truckers explained that the wrathful deity White Brahma Buddha was up there slashing the darkness with his sword, protecting the nomads' yaks from the silent snow leopards that crept around us. In the thin air I dreamt of drowning.

Frank worked as a photographer in Beijing, and we were out there because he'd been hired for a series on migrant workers in China's frontier. Frank had invited Nate and then Nate

invited me. At home in New York I thought that Nate was interested in me, but since we'd arrived in China his attention had drifted. I didn't know why. I looked for affection in everything they each did.

When Frank introduced me as his wife so truckers wouldn't assume I was for hire, I felt like I was in love with him again, as if he were proposing. But Frank would never propose. His heart orbited around a black hole of independence at the expense of everything else. That's why we'd broken up. When you love someone who privileges freedom above all else, who suspects you of trying to shrink his world, not expand it, you have two choices: prove to him that love is not possession, or prove that you don't want to possess him. I tried both, but honoring his fears at the expense of mine brought me so much pain, and when he saw how much his ambivalent love hurt me, it confirmed to him that he'd rather be alone. His preferred state was exile, a mode of living by spontaneity, which was like carrying a gun, every moment heightened with the potential for heroism and death.

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"I'm not going," Nate said, "not in a Muslim city."

"But, it's still China. This is what businessmen do here. It's normal. It's like Bangkok."

“You’re not businessmen,” I said.

“It doesn’t feel like Bangkok,” Nate said. There were two-humped camels in the street, bearded men in skullcaps embroidered with crescent moons, and watchful women in knotted burkhas.

“Well, it won’t be a ping-pong show, but I still think we should go.”

“Ping-pong show?” I said. I fell for it.

“The chicks shoot the ping-pong balls out like an air gun,” Frank said. “Their muscles are so strong. You can *feel* it.”

“How do you know what it feels like?” I said.

“What’s it to you? It’s legal.”

“You aren’t supposed to tell her that!” Nate said.

“You paid for it?”

“It’s normal there,” Frank said. “It’s an entire industry.” Frank and I had been dating when they went on that trip to Thailand, and I didn’t know if he’d forgotten that, or if he was being cruel.

“It was a long time ago,” Nate said, “and we just did it once.”

“Maybe you did,” Frank said. “Besides, it’s a good-paying job for them.”

“Don’t act like you’re doing them a favor,” I said.

“You don’t know anything about it,” Frank said. “Don’t be such a prude.”

Even though Frank had lost his virginity to me in high school, and we'd had sex many times, he still called me that. I wasn't going to argue with him about it in front of Nate, but it hurt my feelings. He acted like he knew everything about sex and I knew nothing. I didn't like the way he talked about women, but I didn't like being left out either. Nate would laugh. I couldn't. I felt defeated by it.

On the way into our hotel bar we stopped at the front desk to ask about the Kyrgyz border crossing.

"Border closes tomorrow," the man said. "Maybe one week closed."

"Can we cross tomorrow?" Frank asked.

"I advise leave now," he said.

"Now?" It was one in the morning.

"Problems at the border, sir," he said.

"What do you think?" Nate asked, his cigarette hanging from his mouth, his green eyes bright against his new, dark beard. His flannel shirt was covered in dust and his jeans had streaks of engine grease across the thighs. Still, I wanted to put my head against his chest. I wanted him to put his dirty arms around me. I wanted to make Frank shut up.

"I have to get the exit stamp," Frank said. In order to live legally in Beijing, he had to leave the country every three months. He had three days left on his visa.

"OK, Elizabeth?" Nate said.

"Fine," I said. It wasn't fine. I wanted privacy to think about Frank and the prostitute.

“We’ll take a taxi in thirty minutes,” Frank said.

“They’re closing the border because of an election,” Nate said as we walked to our rooms.

“In Kyrgyzstan?” I said.

“They’re expecting riots.”

“Says who?” Frank said.

“State department website.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t go?” I said.

“You know I can’t afford to have problems with my papers,” Frank said.

“The riots will probably just be in the capital,” Nate said.

“So why would they close the border?”

“We have to go,” Frank said to me. “I’ll go deal with the bill. Try not to take such a long time packing.” He went downstairs with his bag.

“What do you know about the election?” I asked Nate.

“I can’t even pronounce the parties’ names. One’s Islamist and the other’s old Soviets.”

“Don’t you think that sounds worse than paperwork problems here?”

“Frank has to get his stamp,” he said, “and I want to see the Pamir Highway. Come on, it’s supposed to be the most beautiful road in the world. We’re so close.”

There had been many times on the trip when I thought we were doing something too risky, like traveling without the required guides and permits into China’s disputed regions, or

hitching rides with truckers burnt out on speed. I was tired of being the one who was afraid of everything. I was also mad at Frank for calling me prude, which beyond the sexual insult was what he was always criticizing me for: I was too timid. I was too sheltered. I was too passive. One of the reasons I'd come on this trip was because I wanted to be as unflinching as he was. I clenched my fists so my nails dug into my palms and said to myself, don't make them regret bringing you.

Downstairs they were squatting around a mah-jongg game with the driver. We bought cold beer and a carton of Gauloises to barter with and took off into the desert in the taxi. The highway soon deteriorated into a dirt track, and when we pulled over to let someone pass, the somnolent smell of sage from under our tires saturated the night air. The taxi driver turned off the headlights to make his car stereo louder and played a Bollywood musical we'd heard all over China, and he loved that we knew the words. We offered him beer, and even though he was Muslim he drank with us. The guys cranked down the windows and stuck their heads out, looking for oncoming traffic, or looking at the sky, which touched down on the desert all around us like a black, silky parachute.

To our right the tundra extended north onto the Mongolian steppe. Unseen, far off on our left, were the Himalayas, holy white peaks in the sky. We sang and drank and smoked. I leaned against Nate's shoulder. This road was developed a century before Christ, when Chinese traded silk for Fergana horses so tough they were said to sweat blood. For hundreds of years

caravanserais and cities rose from the sand only because China guarded the secret of silk production—the silk worm.

When I looked into the dark desert I imagined the astronomers who'd made their camps there, tracing the night sky with gold dust to make illuminated manuscripts for their khanates. Riderless donkeys had led thousand-camel caravans loaded with sesame seeds, figs, and magnetic compasses east in return for the bolts of silk that went west, much of it bound for insatiable consumers in Rome. Sutra-seeking pilgrims gathered at these oases, relaying the news that the prince Siddhartha Gautama had escaped samsara, the cycle of suffering. This exchange of goods, peoples, and ideas continued for six-hundred years, until a scorned princess smuggled silk worms out of China in her coiffure. I looked into the emptiness, knowing that the religions, the warriors, the women, and the empires that made our world had once considered this desert its center.

I wanted legends. I wanted exotica. I wanted to be like those heroes from history, traders and explorers, astute and adventurous, and different from everyone who stayed home. I wanted to see the next place and the next place. I was twenty-three. I was out there for moments like these, when I was wide-awake, sustained by anticipation.

The road ended at the border station, a squat concrete building demarcating the end of the Far East. A crowd of women waving maos closed in on the taxi as we slowed. They wore long skirts and their heads were covered in floral scarves that looked like tablecloth scraps. They weren't Chinese. Their cheeks were wider, their eyes like almonds.

“They want to shop in Kashgar,” Frank translated as the driver spoke, “before the border closes. They’re Kyrgyz.”

As we pushed through the women to get our bags from the trunk, their desperation to take our seats scared me. The taxi left us, and before the driver killed its lights, I saw the women’s arms throwing our beer bottles out the window.

“Do you think they’ll ask about my dad?” I said. My father had been a U.S. Senator since I was eleven. Nate and Frank knew not to bring him up, and I hadn’t met anybody who asked about him yet. But this was our first border crossing. We didn’t know if he would help or endanger us out here. I’d refused to carry a diplomatic passport. The only thing I had was a list of phone numbers to call in an emergency.

“I don’t think you should say anything,” Frank said. “I’ll talk.”

“But don’t lie if they ask you,” Nate said.

Few people spoke English well enough to talk to me without going through Frank, so I wasn’t worried about being confronted. I doubted the border guards would recognize my name, Elizabeth Austen Moore, and even if they did, I trusted Frank to handle it.

To make the border crossing we needed to get through this Chinese post with tourist exit stamps, as opposed to press corps stamps, and then clear the Kyrgyz customs on the other side. We divvied Frank’s camera gear between us so he wouldn’t look like a journalist.

“Don’t leave me alone,” I said to Frank.

“You’ve got the rest of my film,” he said. “I won’t.”

We went together to speak to the Han guard. He copied our names into a ledger and asked us to sign. I loved seeing our names in that book, neat block letters amid Cyrillic curves and Mandarin characters.

“He says it’s ten kilometers of demilitarized road to the Kyrgyz border station. We have to hitch with one of these truckers,” Frank said. The guard wrote the exit date on the visas in our passports and didn’t ask to search the bags or about my name.

“Demilitarized?” I said.

“Welcome to the U.S.S.R.,” Nate said. He was thrilled. We were entering the outposts of the former Russian empire. We didn’t know anybody else who’d been there.

The sun was rising behind us. It wasn’t a soft light, wasn’t romantic or pink. The atmosphere was so clear and the distances around us so vast that the cold dawn lit us like a harsh halogen bulb switched on in the middle of the night, tingeing our faces in an electromotive green.

Frank pointed to a truck painted in a technicolor lattice pattern and a mural of a Pakistani Airlines jet over the Hindu Kush. Dozens of small brass bells hung from the bumper, and flashing rope lights looped around the back. A young man in an Air Jordan t-shirt sang along to pop music as he cleaned his windshield. Frank wanted to photograph him. The trucker showed his truck off to Frank, who was so excited he forgot not to look like a journalist, setting up his tripod and walking around the truck with his light meter.

The trucker agreed to take us to the Kyrgyz border station for about five bucks, though there was barely room for us. The front seat was taken up by a bedroll, blankets, and clothes,



which I sat on. Coins and whirligigs hung from the ceiling on ribbons. He made us take off our shoes, and the guys' feet stank up the cab. They crawled to the space behind the front seats and sat on boxes of radishes. We drove slowly, the driver yelling over the music and grating engine. I could tell he was asking Frank about me.

"Meiyou, meiyou," Frank said, which means no, not possible.

"He has track marks," I said, looking at his bruised, thin arms. His teeth and gums were stained black from chewing betel.

We'd driven about five kilometers, halfway, when Frank pulled out his camera. The driver watched him in the rearview mirror. Even though Frank had already taken dozens of photographs of him in the lot, now the driver waved his arms and shook his head.

"Something's wrong with him," Frank said. "He's slurring." Frank apologized, but before he put his camera away we all heard the click of the shutter.

The driver turned to Frank, black spit dripping down his chin. Frank yelled at him, pointing at the road. It was as if the man forgot he was driving. He pulled a knife from under his seat. There was so little space in the cab that we couldn't back away from him. Frank tried to calm him, but he wasn't listening.

There weren't any doors in the back where they were sitting. "Open the door, Elizabeth," Nate said. "Jump out!"

"Too fast," I said. I had my hands on the ceiling, caught up in the ribbons and clinking medallions, trying to protect my head as we bounced over deep ruts.

Nate kicked at the driver's seat, jiggling it back and forth, trying to break the man's angry trance. The driver stabbed his knife into the pile of bedding between us. The way the blade sunk into the thick wool blanket terrified me. I was as close as I could get to the door.

"Don't touch her!" Nate yelled, kicking harder. The driver's seat wasn't locked into place, and it sprang forward. His face hit the steering wheel, and we went off the road as he lay limp over the wheel. I jumped out. I tried to roll when I hit the ground but really just lay there where I landed. The truck stopped in the sandy soil.

"Are you hurt?" Nate said.

"No," I said, but I didn't get up. He put his hand on my head, as if he were checking to see if I had a fever. I stared up at him. I wanted to stay like that.

"What's wrong with her?" Frank said.

"Nothing." Nate pulled me up and hugged my face into his chest and kissed my forehead.

"Is the driver hurt?" I said.

Nate went to check.

"Don't get too close," I said.

"What are we going to do about it if he is hurt?" Frank said.

"There's blood coming out of his nose," Nate said.

"Should we wait for the next truck?"

"I am not getting in another truck," Frank said. "Let's start walking."

"We can't leave him," I said.

“He’s breathing,” Nate said. “We’ll tell the first person we see. What can we do for him? He still has that knife in his hand.” Nate pulled our shoes and bags out of the cab.

I looked in from the passenger side. I didn’t think we should leave him.

“What was he saying?” Nate asked.

“I don’t know,” Frank said. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Nate and I looked at each other, surprised at the panic in Frank’s voice. I didn’t have a good argument for staying. We were afraid to get within arm’s length of him. We decided to wave down the first car we saw and explain what had happened. We put on our backpacks and walked to the road. It was hilly enough that we couldn’t see far in front of us. We walked west, towards Kyrgyzstan.

It got hot fast out there, and my adrenaline faded. We stopped at an abandoned truck alongside the road, its wheels deep in the sand. The wooden truck bed had exploded from being overpacked with garlic that must have swelled in the sun. Garlic cloves piled like drip castles underneath the splits in the siding. We sat on our bags in the pungent shade of the truck.

“We’re protected from vampires,” I said.

“Yetis are our real problem out here,” Nate said, “and cracked-out drivers.”

“I’m worried about him.”

“He was probably shooting up before we got in,” Frank said, “and now he’s passed out.”

“He’s not passed out,” I said. “He’s hurt.” I knew Frank was acting like this because he felt guilty about taking that last photograph. We were in a no-man’s-land between the Chinese and Kyrgyz governments. It was a bad place for anyone to be hurt.

We saw a car coming from the China side. Frank walked to the road to wave it down. Kyrgyz women were crammed into the back seats. The women were pointing at us, their white fingertips pressed against the window. They didn’t stop.

“What was that?” Nate said.

“Let’s keep walking,” I said. “I don’t like being trapped in here.”

“Frank, why wouldn’t they stop?” Nate said.

“I don’t know.”

I was worried for him. Frank was the one with the most to lose if we got in trouble with China. He had been hired by a German newspaper to photograph the next year’s Olympics, and he intended to stay in Beijing a long time. He was so proud of his fluency; he’d done all the necessary negotiating on the road for us, ordered all our food, translated the truckers’ stories. He brought Mandarin workbooks with him to improve his vocabulary, and he asked lots of questions of people we met, always trying to understand the language and the people better. But, he had a bad temper and could be callous about important things, like if we were responsible for the driver.

“They’re just looking at us because we’re weird,” I said.

“Speak for yourself,” Frank said.

“You’re the weirdest thing out here,” I said. I wanted to make them laugh. “Those fucking pants.” Frank wore fake North Face cargo pants that unzipped at the knee. He said he needed all the pockets for his camera gear.

“At least I know how to rub my sunscreen in so I don’t have ghost face,” Frank said.

“Will you two shut up?” Nate said.

We walked on. Frank kept looking behind us, as if the driver was going to jump on his back.

“I think he’s fine, Frank,” Nate said. “He’s probably passed out, like you said.”

“What do you know?” Frank said.

“We’re here,” I said. We looked down on glass shards gleaming along a concrete wall surrounding the border station. There was a barbed-wire perimeter and a guard tower. It looked a lot like a jail.

“Give me my film back,” said Frank. “I don’t want you to get hassled if they find it. We say we’re tourists on the Silk Road. We like to take pictures. Don’t mention your father.”

“What’s the problem? That’s mostly true,” I said.

“If there is something going on with the election, they won’t want journalists or politicians’ daughters in there.”

“Why didn’t we think about the election before we decided to come here?” I said.

“They just called it,” Nate said.

“Get some cash out of your wallet now in case they want money,” Frank said. “Don’t let them see how much you have.”

“What will we say about the driver?” I put fifty dollars in my jeans pocket.

“That he attacked us!” Frank said.

“Wait,” Nate said. “You have our list of numbers, right? Let’s memorize the number of the ambassador.”

“Let’s make up a way to remember it,” I said.

“Can’t you just fucking remember it?” Frank said.

I had never seen Frank scared like this. Now I wished we’d gone back to the Chinese border station instead, where Frank could speak Mandarin. In Kyrgyzstan, educated people spoke Russian, not English. We didn’t know who had killed whom in the civil wars here after the U.S.S.R. fell in 1991, or who hated whom now. We didn’t know what they ate, what they were proud of, whether they rolled their R’s.

Soldiers with Kalashnikovs guarded the gates. Frank spoke to them in Mandarin, but they responded in Russian. He shook his head. He hated to be helpless.

The burly guards had light blue eyes, which, we’d been told, had come from Alexander the Great, who had “raped their mothers.” One of them was an especially unusual mixture of Caucasian coloring, pale skin and blonde hair, with broad, Mongolian cheekbones and wide-set light eyes. He was striking, even glamorous.

“English?” Nate said.

“English, OK,” the handsome man said, “passports.”

He looked back and forth from us to our photos and through every page of our passports.

Nate was Jewish and had been to Israel several times. I knew he was worried about the stamps.

“Miss Elizabeth Moore,” the guard said. “Whose wife?”

“She’s with me,” Frank said.

“Mine,” Nate said at the same time.

“Neither?” the guard said.

The guard could see we were rattled. “Miss, come with me.”

“She’s not going with you,” Frank said.

“We must ask some questions.”

“Is there a problem?” Nate said.

“How did you get here?” the guard said.

“You saw us,” Frank said. “We walked.”

“We will ask you some questions and see if there is a problem.”

“You are not going to ask her anything,” Frank said.

“It’s fine,” I said before Frank could say more. We were at a border, and it was normal to be questioned.

They put us in separate rooms. Nate was across the hall from me.

“Sit, please, Elizabeth,” he said, closing the door. “You may call me Alexei. You came in a truck, yes?”

“We tried,” I said, “but the truck got in an accident, and then we walked.”

“Accident?”

“Yes. The driver was on drugs and he hit his face on the steering wheel. He needs help.”

“My friend,” Alexie said, “my pretty little friend, that is not what the driver says. He is with the Chinese. He says the man kicked his seat and tried to kill him and stole his money, one thousand US dollars.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes,” he said, “I think we search your bags and find the money.”

“You’d find our money.”

“I see. You are rich Americans.”

“No!”

“Are you OK?” Nate yelled from across the hall.

“No,” Alexie said, “you have a big problem.”

“We’re just tourists. The truck driver was crazy. He pulled a knife on us.” I waved my hand around, stabbing at the air. “See? A knife.”

He leaned back in his chair. “I don’t see,” he said.

I tried to remember the phone number.

“It was the Jew, wasn’t it? The Jew attacked him because driver is Muslim.”



I didn't want Nate to hear us. I lowered my voice. "No. The driver attacked us because we tried to take a picture of him. All we did was take a picture. Then he tried to stab my leg, here, with his knife."

Alexei didn't look Muslim, but I didn't know much about the ethnicities there. He wore a wedding ring. He was clean-shaven. He looked about thirty years old.

A guard spoke through the door in Russian, loud, cruel syllables.

"He says your friend has many cameras." Alexei shook his head, as if he were sorry to hear it. "It is illegal for journalists to enter without permits."

"I'm not a journalist. We're tourists. He just likes to take pictures."

"You are with an illegal journalist and a violent Jew. I think you must be guilty of something," he said. "What is it? You are a prostitute?"

"No."

"Why do you travel with two men?"

"They're my friends."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm not a prostitute."

"Too bad," he said. "You are in trouble. And there's not much else you can do."

"Do you want money?"

"No." He squeezed my shoulders as he walked out of the room. "I am locking the door for your safety."

When he closed the door behind him I tried to steady myself by breathing. But I was trembling, gripping the arms of the chair. He didn't want money.

I looked for a phone, but there wasn't one in the office. I heard Alexei across the hall talking to Nate.

“Why did you come here? You want to hold Kalashnikov? You want to fire Russian guns?”

I couldn't hear Nate's reply.

“What do you want? You want our women?”

I heard Nate wheezing, like he'd been punched in the stomach.

I didn't have many choices. The obvious, the proper thing to do was to resist him. Even if I couldn't physically resist him, if I at least tried to, then I would be the victim, and it wouldn't be my fault, and Frank and Nate would feel bad for me. I could scream for help. But the only people who would want to help me were locked up too, so they would have to listen. What would they hear? A girl who needed help. A girl who didn't have the power, or ability, or the cunning to help herself. A girl who had been a sexual object to both of them now being the sexual object of someone else.

I didn't know why Nate had stopped showing interest in me once we'd arrived in China, but I blamed Frank, which might have been unfair, but I was still angry at Frank for hurting me when he'd been my boyfriend, and now I thought he was keeping Nate from me, too. I was also upset by how Frank had taunted me with the Bangkok story the night before. So even though I

was scared, even though Nate was already hurt, what I wanted in that room was to not be made helpless, to not be prude. I cared less about protecting my body than my ego.

I decided I would do something unconventional, something beyond Frank's understanding of me, something that made me the protagonist, something that took guts and prowess. I would do something that men wanted badly, something that both scared and empowered women. I wanted to control the situation by being a person who acts, a person who is not submissive.

As the road ascended into the thin, cold air of the Tibetan plateau, we saw the curvature of the Earth drop behind the steppes we'd crossed in the past weeks, a sea of dark violet tundra. I was with my ex-boyfriend Frank and our friend Nate, hitch-hiking to Central Asia. We rode in open truck beds amid swiveling barber chairs, bolts of brocaded silk, crates of white Hetian jade and burlap bags of elephant garlic, all bound for export. Our single-track road was made narrower by road workers' tents which clung onto steep mountainsides like fungi. Had there been any vultures that high they would have feasted on the piglet carcasses discarded by the laborers.

On the high passes we shivered in our sleeping bags and breathed in the spectral clouds. I was so happy to be out there. In that cloudscape we were part of the swirling sky, and it was easy to believe in astral travel. Tibet was like that: it appeared to be desolate, unless you were capable of believing in Buddhism, which storied the plateau with roving, ancient atmans. Alpine lakes

shone like lapis lazuli, unexpected luminosity that hummed with the dreams of buddhistavas who lay sleeping under the surface.

The only other girls I saw were prostitutes who hung around army checkpoints and nuns on pilgrimages to Mt. Kailash. The nuns strapped wooden blocks onto their hands to protect their palms as they prostrated every one-hundred-and-eighth step. The prostitutes sat back to back at crossroads, asleep, their long, dirty hair tangling together.

On windy nights the makeshift trucker huts where we slept sang like Theremins conducted from the sky, and sometimes the tarp ceilings blew off, exposing us to the icy, minatory moon. The truckers explained that the wrathful deity White Brahma Buddha was up there slashing the darkness with his sword, protecting the nomads' yaks from the silent snow leopards that crept around us. In the thin air I dreamt of drowning.

Frank worked as a photographer in Beijing, and we were out there because he'd been hired for a series on migrant workers in China's frontier. Frank had invited Nate and then Nate invited me. At home in New York I thought that Nate was interested in me, but since we'd arrived in China his attention had drifted. I didn't know why. I looked for affection in everything they each did.

When Frank introduced me as his wife so truckers wouldn't assume I was for hire, I felt like I was in love with him again, as if he were proposing. But Frank would never propose. His heart orbited around a black hole of independence at the expense of everything else. That's why we'd broken up. When you love someone who privileges freedom above all else, who suspects

you of trying to shrink his world, not expand it, you have two choices: prove to him that love is not possession, or prove that you don't want to possess him. I tried both, but honoring his fears at the expense of mine brought me so much pain, and when he saw how much his ambivalent love hurt me, it confirmed to him that he'd rather be alone. His preferred state was exile, a mode of living by spontaneity, which was like carrying a gun, every moment heightened with the potential for heroism and death.

The thing about Frank is that if you could keep up with him, you got to share in the thrill of his devouring of the world. Like me, he believed the grandeur of his environment could stretch the possibilities of his mind, but, unlike me, he'd deliberately made his life into a search for these landscapes. His photographs were proof that the world he wanted to exist could, but you had to seek it and you had to frame it by your own vision. His photographs made me want to sneak out in the night and jump onto trains and swim in clear rivers and hold your hands out to bonfires. He shot straight into light for the prisms, blind spots, and the blown-out whiteness of ecstasy. He shot the road workers' velvet slippers embossed with the Playboy bunny, and the golden calves of reclining Buddhas, and the sparkling quartz and mica of gneissic cliff faces that belied seismic catastrophes. As my boyfriend, he'd also taken so many portraits of me: of my collar bones under water, of the profile of my sleeping face on his bare chest, of my hair blowing wildly on mountain passes, of my dirty hands offering him coffee, of his palm on my wind-burned, happy cheek. I wanted to be the person I looked like in his photographs. But that person's existence depended on Frank's existence.

After five weeks crossing the plateau we were hungry for food that wasn't instant noodles, thirsty for oxygen, bruised from the bumpy roads, and red from the sun, which glared off the snowpack, burning our necks and eyeballs and chapping our lips and hands. We planned to rest in Kashgar, the palm-treed oasis town that marked the end of the plateau and our descent into the desert, for a few days before our visas expired and we crossed into Kyrgyzstan.

We checked into a hotel in Kashgar — mattresses, coffee that wasn't Nescafe, hot water — and ate in a night bazaar lit by smoky kerosene lamps. Lamb heads and chicken feet hung as advertisements from the vendors' carts. Men tossed noodle dough into long strips like jump ropes. I bought almonds, cinnamon cakes, and figs. With great pleasure we deliberated the next days' meals over over cold Tsingtao beer. Frank was drunk and trying to convince Nate to go to a strip club with him. I thought it was a show Frank was putting on for me, baiting me to object.

"I'm not going," Nate said, "not in a Muslim city."

"But, it's still China. This is what businessmen do here. It's normal. It's like Bangkok."

"You're not businessmen," I said.

"It doesn't feel like Bangkok," Nate said. There were two-humped camels in the street, bearded men in skullcaps embroidered with crescent moons, and watchful women in knotted burkhas.

"Well, it won't be a ping-pong show, but I still think we should go."

"Ping-pong show?" I said. I fell for it.

“The chicks shoot the ping-pong balls out like an air gun,” Frank said. “Their muscles are so strong. You can *feel* it.”

“How do you know what it feels like?” I said.

“What’s it to you? It’s legal.”

“You aren’t supposed to tell her that!” Nate said.

“You paid for it?”

“It’s normal there,” Frank said. “It’s an entire industry.” Frank and I had been dating when they went on that trip to Thailand, and I didn’t know if he’d forgotten that, or if he was being cruel.

“It was a long time ago,” Nate said, “and we just did it once.”

“Maybe you did,” Frank said. “Besides, it’s a good-paying job for them.”

“Don’t act like you’re doing them a favor,” I said.

“You don’t know anything about it,” Frank said. “Don’t be such a prude.”

Even though Frank had lost his virginity to me in high school, and we’d had sex many times, he still called me that. I wasn’t going to argue with him about it in front of Nate, but it hurt my feelings. He acted like he knew everything about sex and I knew nothing. I didn’t like the way he talked about women, but I didn’t like being left out either. Nate would laugh. I couldn’t. I felt defeated by it.

On the way into our hotel bar we stopped at the front desk to ask about the Kyrgyz border crossing.

“Border closes tomorrow,” the man said. “Maybe one week closed.”

“Can we cross tomorrow?” Frank asked.

“I advise leave now,” he said.

“Now?” It was one in the morning.

“Problems at the border, sir,” he said.

“What do you think?” Nate asked, his cigarette hanging from his mouth, his green eyes bright against his new, dark beard. His flannel shirt was covered in dust and his jeans had streaks of engine grease across the thighs. Still, I wanted to put my head against his chest. I wanted him to put his dirty arms around me. I wanted to make Frank shut up.

“I have to get the exit stamp,” Frank said. In order to live legally in Beijing, he had to leave the country every three months. He had three days left on his visa.

“OK, Elizabeth?” Nate said.

“Fine,” I said. It wasn’t fine. I wanted privacy to think about Frank and the prostitute.

“We’ll take a taxi in thirty minutes,” Frank said.

“They’re closing the border because of an election,” Nate said as we walked to our rooms.

“In Kyrgyzstan?” I said.

“They’re expecting riots.”

“Says who?” Frank said.

“State department website.”



“Maybe we shouldn’t go?” I said.

“You know I can’t afford to have problems with my papers,” Frank said.

“The riots will probably just be in the capital,” Nate said.

“So why would they close the border?”

“We have to go,” Frank said to me. “I’ll go deal with the bill. Try not to take such a long time packing.” He went downstairs with his bag.

“What do you know about the election?” I asked Nate.

“I can’t even pronounce the parties’ names. One’s Islamist and the other’s old Soviets.”

“Don’t you think that sounds worse than paperwork problems here?”

“Frank has to get his stamp,” he said, “and I want to see the Pamir Highway. Come on, it’s supposed to be the most beautiful road in the world. We’re so close.”

There had been many times on the trip when I thought we were doing something too risky, like traveling without the required guides and permits into China’s disputed regions, or hitching rides with truckers burnt out on speed. I was tired of being the one who was afraid of everything. I was also mad at Frank for calling me prude, which beyond the sexual insult was what he was always criticizing me for: I was too timid. I was too sheltered. I was too passive. One of the reasons I’d come on this trip was because I wanted to be as unflinching as he was. I clenched my fists so my nails dug into my palms and said to myself, don’t make them regret bringing you.

Downstairs they were squatting around a mah-jongg game with the driver. We bought cold beer and a carton of Gauloises to barter with and took off into the desert in the taxi. The highway soon deteriorated into a dirt track, and when we pulled over to let someone pass, the somnolent smell of sage from under our tires saturated the night air. The taxi driver turned off the headlights to make his car stereo louder and played a Bollywood musical we'd heard all over China, and he loved that we knew the words. We offered him beer, and even though he was Muslim he drank with us. The guys cranked down the windows and stuck their heads out, looking for oncoming traffic, or looking at the sky, which touched down on the desert all around us like a black, silky parachute.

To our right the tundra extended north onto the Mongolian steppe. Unseen, far off on our left, were the Himalayas, holy white peaks in the sky. We sang and drank and smoked. I leaned against Nate's shoulder. This road was developed a century before Christ, when Chinese traded silk for Fergana horses so tough they were said to sweat blood. For hundreds of years caravanserais and cities rose from the sand only because China guarded the secret of silk production—the silk worm.

When I looked into the dark desert I imagined the astronomers who'd made their camps there, tracing the night sky with gold dust to make illuminated manuscripts for their khanates. Riderless donkeys had led thousand-camel caravans loaded with sesame seeds, figs, and magnetic compasses east in return for the bolts of silk that went west, much of it bound for insatiable consumers in Rome. Sutra-seeking pilgrims gathered at these oases, relaying the news

that the prince Siddhartha Gautama had escaped samsara, the cycle of suffering. This exchange of goods, peoples, and ideas continued for six-hundred years, until a scorned princess smuggled silk worms out of China in her coiffure. I looked into the emptiness, knowing that the religions, the warriors, the women, and the empires that made our world had once considered this desert its center.

I wanted legends. I wanted exotica. I wanted to be like those heroes from history, traders and explorers, astute and adventurous, and different from everyone who stayed home. I wanted to see the next place and the next place. I was twenty-three. I was out there for moments like these, when I was wide-awake, sustained by anticipation.

The road ended at the border station, a squat concrete building demarcating the end of the Far East. A crowd of women waving maos closed in on the taxi as we slowed. They wore long skirts and their heads were covered in floral scarves that looked like tablecloth scraps. They weren't Chinese. Their cheeks were wider, their eyes like almonds.

"They want to shop in Kashgar," Frank translated as the driver spoke, "before the border closes. They're Kyrgyz."

As we pushed through the women to get our bags from the trunk, their desperation to take our seats scared me. The taxi left us, and before the driver killed its lights, I saw the women's arms throwing our beer bottles out the window.

"Do you think they'll ask about my dad?" I said. My father had been a U.S. Senator since I was eleven. Nate and Frank knew not to bring him up, and I hadn't met anybody who asked

about him yet. But this was our first border crossing. We didn't know if he would help or endanger us out here. I'd refused to carry a diplomatic passport. The only thing I had was a list of phone numbers to call in an emergency.

"I don't think you should say anything," Frank said. "I'll talk."

"But don't lie if they ask you," Nate said.

Few people spoke English well enough to talk to me without going through Frank, so I wasn't worried about being confronted. I doubted the border guards would recognize my name, Elizabeth Austen Moore, and even if they did, I trusted Frank to handle it.

To make the border crossing we needed to get through this Chinese post with tourist exit stamps, as opposed to press corps stamps, and then clear the Kyrgyz customs on the other side. We divvied Frank's camera gear between us so he wouldn't look like a journalist.

"Don't leave me alone," I said to Frank.

"You've got the rest of my film," he said. "I won't."

We went together to speak to the Han guard. He copied our names into a ledger and asked us to sign. I loved seeing our names in that book, neat block letters amid Cyrillic curves and Mandarin characters.

"He says it's ten kilometers of demilitarized road to the Kyrgyz border station. We have to hitch with one of these truckers," Frank said. The guard wrote the exit date on the visas in our passports and didn't ask to search the bags or about my name.

"Demilitarized?" I said.

“Welcome to the U.S.S.R.,” Nate said. He was thrilled. We were entering the outposts of the former Russian empire. We didn’t know anybody else who’d been there.

The sun was rising behind us. It wasn’t a soft light, wasn’t romantic or pink. The atmosphere was so clear and the distances around us so vast that the cold dawn lit us like a harsh halogen bulb switched on in the middle of the night, tingeing our faces in an electromotive green.

Frank pointed to a truck painted in a technicolor lattice pattern and a mural of a Pakistani Airlines jet over the Hindu Kush. Dozens of small brass bells hung from the bumper, and flashing rope lights looped around the back. A young man in an Air Jordan t-shirt sang along to pop music as he cleaned his windshield. Frank wanted to photograph him. The trucker showed his truck off to Frank, who was so excited he forgot not to look like a journalist, setting up his tripod and walking around the truck with his light meter.

The trucker agreed to take us to the Kyrgyz border station for about five bucks, though there was barely room for us. The front seat was taken up by a bedroll, blankets, and clothes, which I sat on. Coins and whirligigs hung from the ceiling on ribbons. He made us take off our shoes, and the guys’ feet stank up the cab. They crawled to the space behind the front seats and sat on boxes of radishes. We drove slowly, the driver yelling over the music and grating engine. I could tell he was asking Frank about me.

“Meiyou, meiyou,” Frank said, which means no, not possible.

“He has track marks,” I said, looking at his bruised, thin arms. His teeth and gums were stained black from chewing betel.

We'd driven about five kilometers, halfway, when Frank pulled out his camera. The driver watched him in the rearview mirror. Even though Frank had already taken dozens of photographs of him in the lot, now the driver waved his arms and shook his head.

"Something's wrong with him," Frank said. "He's slurring." Frank apologized, but before he put his camera away we all heard the click of the shutter.

The driver turned to Frank, black spit dripping down his chin. Frank yelled at him, pointing at the road. It was as if the man forgot he was driving. He pulled a knife from under his seat. There was so little space in the cab that we couldn't back away from him. Frank tried to calm him, but he wasn't listening.

There weren't any doors in the back where they were sitting. "Open the door, Elizabeth," Nate said. "Jump out!"

"Too fast," I said. I had my hands on the ceiling, caught up in the ribbons and clinking medallions, trying to protect my head as we bounced over deep ruts.

Nate kicked at the driver's seat, jiggling it back and forth, trying to break the man's angry trance. The driver stabbed his knife into the pile of bedding between us. The way the blade sunk into the thick wool blanket terrified me. I was as close as I could get to the door.

"Don't touch her!" Nate yelled, kicking harder. The driver's seat wasn't locked into place, and it sprang forward. His face hit the steering wheel, and we went off the road as he lay limp over the wheel. I jumped out. I tried to roll when I hit the ground but really just lay there where I landed. The truck stopped in the sandy soil.

“Are you hurt?” Nate said.

“No,” I said, but I didn’t get up. He put his hand on my head, as if he were checking to see if I had a fever. I stared up at him. I wanted to stay like that.

“What’s wrong with her?” Frank said.

“Nothing.” Nate pulled me up and hugged my face into his chest and kissed my forehead.

“Is the driver hurt?” I said.

Nate went to check.

“Don’t get too close,” I said.

“What are we going to do about it if he is hurt?” Frank said.

“There’s blood coming out of his nose,” Nate said.

“Should we wait for the next truck?”

“I am not getting in another truck,” Frank said. “Let’s start walking.”

“We can’t leave him,” I said.

“He’s breathing,” Nate said. “We’ll tell the first person we see. What can we do for him? He still has that knife in his hand.” Nate pulled our shoes and bags out of the cab.

I looked in from the passenger side. I didn’t think we should leave him.

“What was he saying?” Nate asked.

“I don’t know,” Frank said. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Nate and I looked at each other, surprised at the panic in Frank’s voice. I didn’t have a good argument for staying. We were afraid to get within arm’s length of him. We decided to

wave down the first car we saw and explain what had happened. We put on our backpacks and walked to the road. It was hilly enough that we couldn't see far in front of us. We walked west, towards Kyrgyzstan.

It got hot fast out there, and my adrenaline faded. We stopped at an abandoned truck alongside the road, its wheels deep in the sand. The wooden truck bed had exploded from being overpacked with garlic that must have swelled in the sun. Garlic cloves piled like drip castles underneath the splits in the siding. We sat on our bags in the pungent shade of the truck.

"We're protected from vampires," I said.

"Yetis are our real problem out here," Nate said, "and cracked-out drivers."

"I'm worried about him."

"He was probably shooting up before we got in," Frank said, "and now he's passed out."

"He's not passed out," I said. "He's hurt." I knew Frank was acting like this because he felt guilty about taking that last photograph. We were in a no-man's-land between the Chinese and Kyrgyz governments. It was a bad place for anyone to be hurt.

We saw a car coming from the China side. Frank walked to the road to wave it down. Kyrgyz women were crammed into the back seats. The women were pointing at us, their white fingertips pressed against the window. They didn't stop.

"What was that?" Nate said.

"Let's keep walking," I said. "I don't like being trapped in here."

"Frank, why wouldn't they stop?" Nate said.



“I don’t know.”

I was worried for him. Frank was the one with the most to lose if we got in trouble with China. He had been hired by a German newspaper to photograph the next year’s Olympics, and he intended to stay in Beijing a long time. He was so proud of his fluency; he’d done all the necessary negotiating on the road for us, ordered all our food, translated the truckers’ stories. He brought Mandarin workbooks with him to improve his vocabulary, and he asked lots of questions of people we met, always trying to understand the language and the people better. But, he had a bad temper and could be callous about important things, like if we were responsible for the driver.

“They’re just looking at us because we’re weird,” I said.

“Speak for yourself,” Frank said.

“You’re the weirdest thing out here,” I said. I wanted to make them laugh. “Those fucking pants.” Frank wore fake North Face cargo pants that unzipped at the knee. He said he needed all the pockets for his camera gear.

“At least I know how to rub my sunscreen in so I don’t have ghost face,” Frank said.

“Will you two shut up?” Nate said.

We walked on. Frank kept looking behind us, as if the driver was going to jump on his back.

“I think he’s fine, Frank,” Nate said. “He’s probably passed out, like you said.”

“What do you know?” Frank said.

“We’re here,” I said. We looked down on glass shards gleaming along a concrete wall surrounding the border station. There was a barbed-wire perimeter and a guard tower. It looked a lot like a jail.

“Give me my film back,” said Frank. “I don’t want you to get hassled if they find it. We say we’re tourists on the Silk Road. We like to take pictures. Don’t mention your father.”

“What’s the problem? That’s mostly true,” I said.

“If there is something going on with the election, they won’t want journalists or politicians’ daughters in there.”

“Why didn’t we think about the election before we decided to come here?” I said.

“They just called it,” Nate said.

“Get some cash out of your wallet now in case they want money,” Frank said. “Don’t let them see how much you have.”

“What will we say about the driver?” I put fifty dollars in my jeans pocket.

“That he attacked us!” Frank said.

“Wait,” Nate said. “You have our list of numbers, right? Let’s memorize the number of the ambassador.”

“Let’s make up a way to remember it,” I said.

“Can’t you just fucking remember it?” Frank said.

I had never seen Frank scared like this. Now I wished we’d gone back to the Chinese border station instead, where Frank could speak Mandarin. In Kyrgyzstan, educated people spoke

Russian, not English. We didn't know who had killed whom in the civil wars here after the U.S.S.R. fell in 1991, or who hated whom now. We didn't know what they ate, what they were proud of, whether they rolled their R's.

Soldiers with Kalashnikovs guarded the gates. Frank spoke to them in Mandarin, but they responded in Russian. He shook his head. He hated to be helpless.

The burly guards had light blue eyes, which, we'd been told, had come from Alexander the Great, who had "raped their mothers." One of them was an especially unusual mixture of Caucasian coloring, pale skin and blonde hair, with broad, Mongolian cheekbones and wide-set light eyes. He was striking, even glamorous.

"English?" Nate said.

"English, OK," the handsome man said, "passports."

He looked back and forth from us to our photos and through every page of our passports.

Nate was Jewish and had been to Israel several times. I knew he was worried about the stamps.

"Miss Elizabeth Moore," the guard said. "Whose wife?"

"She's with me," Frank said.

"Mine," Nate said at the same time.

"Neither?" the guard said.

The guard could see we were rattled. "Miss, come with me."

"She's not going with you," Frank said.

"We must ask some questions."

“Is there a problem?” Nate said.

“How did you get here?” the guard said.

“You saw us,” Frank said. “We walked.”

“We will ask you some questions and see if there is a problem.”

“You are not going to ask her anything,” Frank said.

“It’s fine,” I said before Frank could say more. We were at a border, and it was normal to be questioned.

They put us in separate rooms. Nate was across the hall from me.

“Sit, please, Elizabeth,” he said, closing the door. “You may call me Alexei. You came in a truck, yes?”

“We tried,” I said, “but the truck got in an accident, and then we walked.”

“Accident?”

“Yes. The driver was on drugs and he hit his face on the steering wheel. He needs help.”

“My friend,” Alexie said, “my pretty little friend, that is not what the driver says. He is with the Chinese. He says the man kicked his seat and tried to kill him and stole his money, one thousand US dollars.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes,” he said, “I think we search your bags and find the money.”

“You’d find our money.”

“I see. You are rich Americans.”

“No!”

“Are you OK?” Nate yelled from across the hall.

“No,” Alexie said, “you have a big problem.”

“We’re just tourists. The truck driver was crazy. He pulled a knife on us.” I waved my hand around, stabbing at the air. “See? A knife.”

He leaned back in his chair. “I don’t see,” he said.

I tried to remember the phone number.

“It was the Jew, wasn’t it? The Jew attacked him because driver is Muslim.”

I didn’t want Nate to hear us. I lowered my voice. “No. The driver attacked us because we tried to take a picture of him. All we did was take a picture. Then he tried to stab my leg, here, with his knife.”

Alexei didn’t look Muslim, but I didn’t know much about the ethnicities there. He wore a wedding ring. He was clean-shaven. He looked about thirty years old.

A guard spoke through the door in Russian, loud, cruel syllables.

“He says your friend has many cameras.” Alexei shook his head, as if he were sorry to hear it. “It is illegal for journalists to enter without permits.”

“I’m not a journalist. We’re tourists. He just likes to take pictures.”

“You are with an illegal journalist and a violent Jew. I think you must be guilty of something,” he said. “What is it? You are a prostitute?”

“No.”

“Why do you travel with two men?”

“They’re my friends.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m not a prostitute.”

“Too bad,” he said. “You are in trouble. And there’s not much else you can do.”

“Do you want money?”

“No.” He squeezed my shoulders as he walked out of the room. “I am locking the door for your safety.”

When he closed the door behind him I tried to steady myself by breathing. But I was trembling, gripping the arms of the chair. He didn’t want money.

I looked for a phone, but there wasn’t one in the office. I heard Alexei across the hall talking to Nate.

“Why did you come here? You want to hold Kalashnikov? You want to fire Russian guns?”

I couldn’t hear Nate’s reply.

“What do you want? You want our women?”

I heard Nate wheezing, like he’d been punched in the stomach.

I didn’t have many choices. The obvious, the proper thing to do was to resist him. Even if I couldn’t physically resist him, if I at least tried to, then I would be the victim, and it wouldn’t be my fault, and Frank and Nate would feel bad for me. I could scream for help. But the only

people who would want to help me were locked up too, so they would have to listen. What would they hear? A girl who needed help. A girl who didn't have the power, or ability, or the cunning to help herself. A girl who had been a sexual object to both of them now being the sexual object of someone else.

I didn't know why Nate had stopped showing interest in me once we'd arrived in China, but I blamed Frank, which might have been unfair, but I was still angry at Frank for hurting me when he'd been my boyfriend, and now I thought he was keeping Nate from me, too. I was also upset by how Frank had taunted me with the Bangkok story the night before. So even though I was scared, even though Nate was already hurt, what I wanted in that room was to not be made helpless, to not be prude. I cared less about protecting my body than my ego.

I decided I would do something unconventional, something beyond Frank's understanding of me, something that made me the protagonist, something that took guts and prowess. I would do something that men wanted badly, something that both scared and empowered women. I wanted to control the situation by being a person who acts, a person who is not submissive.

As the road ascended into the thin, cold air of the Tibetan plateau, we saw the curvature of the Earth drop behind the steppes we'd crossed in the past weeks, a sea of dark violet tundra. I was with my ex-boyfriend Frank and our friend Nate, hitch-hiking to Central Asia. We rode in open truck beds amid swiveling barber chairs, bolts of brocaded silk, crates of white Hetian jade

and burlap bags of elephant garlic, all bound for export. Our single-track road was made narrower by road workers' tents which clung onto steep mountainsides like fungi. Had there been any vultures that high they would have feasted on the piglet carcasses discarded by the laborers.

On the high passes we shivered in our sleeping bags and breathed in the spectral clouds. I was so happy to be out there. In that cloudscape we were part of the swirling sky, and it was easy to believe in astral travel. Tibet was like that: it appeared to be desolate, unless you were capable of believing in Buddhism, which storied the plateau with roving, ancient atmans. Alpine lakes shone like lapis lazuli, unexpected luminosity that hummed with the dreams of boddhistavas who lay sleeping under the surface.

The only other girls I saw were prostitutes who hung around army checkpoints and nuns on pilgrimages to Mt. Kailash. The nuns strapped wooden blocks onto their hands to protect their palms as they prostrated every one-hundred-and-eighth step. The prostitutes sat back to back at crossroads, asleep, their long, dirty hair tangling together.

On windy nights the makeshift trucker huts where we slept sang like Theremins conducted from the sky, and sometimes the tarp ceilings blew off, exposing us to the icy, minatory moon. The truckers explained that the wrathful deity White Brahma Buddha was up there slashing the darkness with his sword, protecting the nomads' yaks from the silent snow leopards that crept around us. In the thin air I dreamt of drowning.

Frank worked as a photographer in Beijing, and we were out there because he'd been hired for a series on migrant workers in China's frontier. Frank had invited Nate and then Nate



invited me. At home in New York I thought that Nate was interested in me, but since we'd arrived in China his attention had drifted. I didn't know why. I looked for affection in everything they each did.

When Frank introduced me as his wife so truckers wouldn't assume I was for hire, I felt like I was in love with him again, as if he were proposing. But Frank would never propose. His heart orbited around a black hole of independence at the expense of everything else. That's why we'd broken up. When you love someone who privileges freedom above all else, who suspects you of trying to shrink his world, not expand it, you have two choices: prove to him that love is not possession, or prove that you don't want to possess him. I tried both, but honoring his fears at the expense of mine brought me so much pain, and when he saw how much his ambivalent love hurt me, it confirmed to him that he'd rather be alone. His preferred state was exile, a mode of living by spontaneity, which was like carrying a gun, every moment heightened with the potential for heroism and death.

The thing about Frank is that if you could keep up with him, you got to share in the thrill of his devouring of the world. Like me, he believed the grandeur of his environment could stretch the possibilities of his mind, but, unlike me, he'd deliberately made his life into a search for these landscapes. His photographs were proof that the world he wanted to exist could, but you had to seek it and you had to frame it by your own vision. His photographs made me want to sneak out in the night and jump onto trains and swim in clear rivers and hold your hands out to bonfires. He shot straight into light for the prisms, blind spots, and the blown-out whiteness of

ecstasy. He shot the road workers' velvet slippers embossed with the Playboy bunny, and the golden calves of reclining Buddhas, and the sparkling quartz and mica of gneissic cliff faces that belied seismic catastrophes. As my boyfriend, he'd also taken so many portraits of me: of my collar bones under water, of the profile of my sleeping face on his bare chest, of my hair blowing wildly on mountain passes, of my dirty hands offering him coffee, of his palm on my wind-burned, happy cheek. I wanted to be the person I looked like in his photographs. But that person's existence depended on Frank's existence.

After five weeks crossing the plateau we were hungry for food that wasn't instant noodles, thirsty for oxygen, bruised from the bumpy roads, and red from the sun, which glared off the snowpack, burning our necks and eyeballs and chapping our lips and hands. We planned to rest in Kashgar, the palm-treed oasis town that marked the end of the plateau and our descent into the desert, for a few days before our visas expired and we crossed into Kyrgyzstan.

We checked into a hotel in Kashgar — mattresses, coffee that wasn't Nescafe, hot water — and ate in a night bazaar lit by smoky kerosene lamps. Lamb heads and chicken feet hung as advertisements from the vendors' carts. Men tossed noodle dough into long strips like jump ropes. I bought almonds, cinnamon cakes, and figs. With great pleasure we deliberated the next days' meals over over cold Tsingtao beer. Frank was drunk and trying to convince Nate to go to a strip club with him. I thought it was a show Frank was putting on for me, baiting me to object.

"I'm not going," Nate said, "not in a Muslim city."

"But, it's still China. This is what businessmen do here. It's normal. It's like Bangkok."

“You’re not businessmen,” I said.

“It doesn’t feel like Bangkok,” Nate said. There were two-humped camels in the street, bearded men in skullcaps embroidered with crescent moons, and watchful women in knotted burkhas.

“Well, it won’t be a ping-pong show, but I still think we should go.”

“Ping-pong show?” I said. I fell for it.

“The chicks shoot the ping-pong balls out like an air gun,” Frank said. “Their muscles are so strong. You can *feel* it.”

“How do you know what it feels like?” I said.

“What’s it to you? It’s legal.”

“You aren’t supposed to tell her that!” Nate said.

“You paid for it?”

“It’s normal there,” Frank said. “It’s an entire industry.” Frank and I had been dating when they went on that trip to Thailand, and I didn’t know if he’d forgotten that, or if he was being cruel.

“It was a long time ago,” Nate said, “and we just did it once.”

“Maybe you did,” Frank said. “Besides, it’s a good-paying job for them.”

“Don’t act like you’re doing them a favor,” I said.

“You don’t know anything about it,” Frank said. “Don’t be such a prude.”

Even though Frank had lost his virginity to me in high school, and we'd had sex many times, he still called me that. I wasn't going to argue with him about it in front of Nate, but it hurt my feelings. He acted like he knew everything about sex and I knew nothing. I didn't like the way he talked about women, but I didn't like being left out either. Nate would laugh. I couldn't. I felt defeated by it.

On the way into our hotel bar we stopped at the front desk to ask about the Kyrgyz border crossing.

"Border closes tomorrow," the man said. "Maybe one week closed."

"Can we cross tomorrow?" Frank asked.

"I advise leave now," he said.

"Now?" It was one in the morning.

"Problems at the border, sir," he said.

"What do you think?" Nate asked, his cigarette hanging from his mouth, his green eyes bright against his new, dark beard. His flannel shirt was covered in dust and his jeans had streaks of engine grease across the thighs. Still, I wanted to put my head against his chest. I wanted him to put his dirty arms around me. I wanted to make Frank shut up.

"I have to get the exit stamp," Frank said. In order to live legally in Beijing, he had to leave the country every three months. He had three days left on his visa.

"OK, Elizabeth?" Nate said.

"Fine," I said. It wasn't fine. I wanted privacy to think about Frank and the prostitute.

“We’ll take a taxi in thirty minutes,” Frank said.

“They’re closing the border because of an election,” Nate said as we walked to our rooms.

“In Kyrgyzstan?” I said.

“They’re expecting riots.”

“Says who?” Frank said.

“State department website.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t go?” I said.

“You know I can’t afford to have problems with my papers,” Frank said.

“The riots will probably just be in the capital,” Nate said.

“So why would they close the border?”

“We have to go,” Frank said to me. “I’ll go deal with the bill. Try not to take such a long time packing.” He went downstairs with his bag.

“What do you know about the election?” I asked Nate.

“I can’t even pronounce the parties’ names. One’s Islamist and the other’s old Soviets.”

“Don’t you think that sounds worse than paperwork problems here?”

“Frank has to get his stamp,” he said, “and I want to see the Pamir Highway. Come on, it’s supposed to be the most beautiful road in the world. We’re so close.”

There had been many times on the trip when I thought we were doing something too risky, like traveling without the required guides and permits into China’s disputed regions, or

hitching rides with truckers burnt out on speed. I was tired of being the one who was afraid of everything. I was also mad at Frank for calling me prude, which beyond the sexual insult was what he was always criticizing me for: I was too timid. I was too sheltered. I was too passive. One of the reasons I'd come on this trip was because I wanted to be as unflinching as he was. I clenched my fists so my nails dug into my palms and said to myself, don't make them regret bringing you.

Downstairs they were squatting around a mah-jongg game with the driver. We bought cold beer and a carton of Gauloises to barter with and took off into the desert in the taxi. The highway soon deteriorated into a dirt track, and when we pulled over to let someone pass, the somnolent smell of sage from under our tires saturated the night air. The taxi driver turned off the headlights to make his car stereo louder and played a Bollywood musical we'd heard all over China, and he loved that we knew the words. We offered him beer, and even though he was Muslim he drank with us. The guys cranked down the windows and stuck their heads out, looking for oncoming traffic, or looking at the sky, which touched down on the desert all around us like a black, silky parachute.

To our right the tundra extended north onto the Mongolian steppe. Unseen, far off on our left, were the Himalayas, holy white peaks in the sky. We sang and drank and smoked. I leaned against Nate's shoulder. This road was developed a century before Christ, when Chinese traded silk for Fergana horses so tough they were said to sweat blood. For hundreds of years

caravanserais and cities rose from the sand only because China guarded the secret of silk production—the silk worm.

When I looked into the dark desert I imagined the astronomers who'd made their camps there, tracing the night sky with gold dust to make illuminated manuscripts for their khanates. Riderless donkeys had led thousand-camel caravans loaded with sesame seeds, figs, and magnetic compasses east in return for the bolts of silk that went west, much of it bound for insatiable consumers in Rome. Sutra-seeking pilgrims gathered at these oases, relaying the news that the prince Siddhartha Gautama had escaped samsara, the cycle of suffering. This exchange of goods, peoples, and ideas continued for six-hundred years, until a scorned princess smuggled silk worms out of China in her coiffure. I looked into the emptiness, knowing that the religions, the warriors, the women, and the empires that made our world had once considered this desert its center.

I wanted legends. I wanted exotica. I wanted to be like those heroes from history, traders and explorers, astute and adventurous, and different from everyone who stayed home. I wanted to see the next place and the next place. I was twenty-three. I was out there for moments like these, when I was wide-awake, sustained by anticipation.

The road ended at the border station, a squat concrete building demarcating the end of the Far East. A crowd of women waving maos closed in on the taxi as we slowed. They wore long skirts and their heads were covered in floral scarves that looked like tablecloth scraps. They weren't Chinese. Their cheeks were wider, their eyes like almonds.

“They want to shop in Kashgar,” Frank translated as the driver spoke, “before the border closes. They’re Kyrgyz.”

As we pushed through the women to get our bags from the trunk, their desperation to take our seats scared me. The taxi left us, and before the driver killed its lights, I saw the women’s arms throwing our beer bottles out the window.

“Do you think they’ll ask about my dad?” I said. My father had been a U.S. Senator since I was eleven. Nate and Frank knew not to bring him up, and I hadn’t met anybody who asked about him yet. But this was our first border crossing. We didn’t know if he would help or endanger us out here. I’d refused to carry a diplomatic passport. The only thing I had was a list of phone numbers to call in an emergency.

“I don’t think you should say anything,” Frank said. “I’ll talk.”

“But don’t lie if they ask you,” Nate said.

Few people spoke English well enough to talk to me without going through Frank, so I wasn’t worried about being confronted. I doubted the border guards would recognize my name, Elizabeth Austen Moore, and even if they did, I trusted Frank to handle it.

To make the border crossing we needed to get through this Chinese post with tourist exit stamps, as opposed to press corps stamps, and then clear the Kyrgyz customs on the other side. We divvied Frank’s camera gear between us so he wouldn’t look like a journalist.

“Don’t leave me alone,” I said to Frank.

“You’ve got the rest of my film,” he said. “I won’t.”



We went together to speak to the Han guard. He copied our names into a ledger and asked us to sign. I loved seeing our names in that book, neat block letters amid Cyrillic curves and Mandarin characters.

“He says it’s ten kilometers of demilitarized road to the Kyrgyz border station. We have to hitch with one of these truckers,” Frank said. The guard wrote the exit date on the visas in our passports and didn’t ask to search the bags or about my name.

“Demilitarized?” I said.

“Welcome to the U.S.S.R.,” Nate said. He was thrilled. We were entering the outposts of the former Russian empire. We didn’t know anybody else who’d been there.

The sun was rising behind us. It wasn’t a soft light, wasn’t romantic or pink. The atmosphere was so clear and the distances around us so vast that the cold dawn lit us like a harsh halogen bulb switched on in the middle of the night, tingeing our faces in an electromotive green.

Frank pointed to a truck painted in a technicolor lattice pattern and a mural of a Pakistani Airlines jet over the Hindu Kush. Dozens of small brass bells hung from the bumper, and flashing rope lights looped around the back. A young man in an Air Jordan t-shirt sang along to pop music as he cleaned his windshield. Frank wanted to photograph him. The trucker showed his truck off to Frank, who was so excited he forgot not to look like a journalist, setting up his tripod and walking around the truck with his light meter.

The trucker agreed to take us to the Kyrgyz border station for about five bucks, though there was barely room for us. The front seat was taken up by a bedroll, blankets, and clothes,

which I sat on. Coins and whirligigs hung from the ceiling on ribbons. He made us take off our shoes, and the guys' feet stank up the cab. They crawled to the space behind the front seats and sat on boxes of radishes. We drove slowly, the driver yelling over the music and grating engine. I could tell he was asking Frank about me.

"Meiyou, meiyou," Frank said, which means no, not possible.

"He has track marks," I said, looking at his bruised, thin arms. His teeth and gums were stained black from chewing betel.

We'd driven about five kilometers, halfway, when Frank pulled out his camera. The driver watched him in the rearview mirror. Even though Frank had already taken dozens of photographs of him in the lot, now the driver waved his arms and shook his head.

"Something's wrong with him," Frank said. "He's slurring." Frank apologized, but before he put his camera away we all heard the click of the shutter.

The driver turned to Frank, black spit dripping down his chin. Frank yelled at him, pointing at the road. It was as if the man forgot he was driving. He pulled a knife from under his seat. There was so little space in the cab that we couldn't back away from him. Frank tried to calm him, but he wasn't listening.

There weren't any doors in the back where they were sitting. "Open the door, Elizabeth," Nate said. "Jump out!"

"Too fast," I said. I had my hands on the ceiling, caught up in the ribbons and clinking medallions, trying to protect my head as we bounced over deep ruts.

Nate kicked at the driver's seat, jiggling it back and forth, trying to break the man's angry trance. The driver stabbed his knife into the pile of bedding between us. The way the blade sunk into the thick wool blanket terrified me. I was as close as I could get to the door.

"Don't touch her!" Nate yelled, kicking harder. The driver's seat wasn't locked into place, and it sprang forward. His face hit the steering wheel, and we went off the road as he lay limp over the wheel. I jumped out. I tried to roll when I hit the ground but really just lay there where I landed. The truck stopped in the sandy soil.

"Are you hurt?" Nate said.

"No," I said, but I didn't get up. He put his hand on my head, as if he were checking to see if I had a fever. I stared up at him. I wanted to stay like that.

"What's wrong with her?" Frank said.

"Nothing." Nate pulled me up and hugged my face into his chest and kissed my forehead.

"Is the driver hurt?" I said.

Nate went to check.

"Don't get too close," I said.

"What are we going to do about it if he is hurt?" Frank said.

"There's blood coming out of his nose," Nate said.

"Should we wait for the next truck?"

"I am not getting in another truck," Frank said. "Let's start walking."

"We can't leave him," I said.

“He’s breathing,” Nate said. “We’ll tell the first person we see. What can we do for him? He still has that knife in his hand.” Nate pulled our shoes and bags out of the cab.

I looked in from the passenger side. I didn’t think we should leave him.

“What was he saying?” Nate asked.

“I don’t know,” Frank said. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Nate and I looked at each other, surprised at the panic in Frank’s voice. I didn’t have a good argument for staying. We were afraid to get within arm’s length of him. We decided to wave down the first car we saw and explain what had happened. We put on our backpacks and walked to the road. It was hilly enough that we couldn’t see far in front of us. We walked west, towards Kyrgyzstan.

It got hot fast out there, and my adrenaline faded. We stopped at an abandoned truck alongside the road, its wheels deep in the sand. The wooden truck bed had exploded from being overpacked with garlic that must have swelled in the sun. Garlic cloves piled like drip castles underneath the splits in the siding. We sat on our bags in the pungent shade of the truck.

“We’re protected from vampires,” I said.

“Yetis are our real problem out here,” Nate said, “and cracked-out drivers.”

“I’m worried about him.”

“He was probably shooting up before we got in,” Frank said, “and now he’s passed out.”

“He’s not passed out,” I said. “He’s hurt.” I knew Frank was acting like this because he felt guilty about taking that last photograph. We were in a no-man’s-land between the Chinese and Kyrgyz governments. It was a bad place for anyone to be hurt.

We saw a car coming from the China side. Frank walked to the road to wave it down. Kyrgyz women were crammed into the back seats. The women were pointing at us, their white fingertips pressed against the window. They didn’t stop.

“What was that?” Nate said.

“Let’s keep walking,” I said. “I don’t like being trapped in here.”

“Frank, why wouldn’t they stop?” Nate said.

“I don’t know.”

I was worried for him. Frank was the one with the most to lose if we got in trouble with China. He had been hired by a German newspaper to photograph the next year’s Olympics, and he intended to stay in Beijing a long time. He was so proud of his fluency; he’d done all the necessary negotiating on the road for us, ordered all our food, translated the truckers’ stories. He brought Mandarin workbooks with him to improve his vocabulary, and he asked lots of questions of people we met, always trying to understand the language and the people better. But, he had a bad temper and could be callous about important things, like if we were responsible for the driver.

“They’re just looking at us because we’re weird,” I said.

“Speak for yourself,” Frank said.

“You’re the weirdest thing out here,” I said. I wanted to make them laugh. “Those fucking pants.” Frank wore fake North Face cargo pants that unzipped at the knee. He said he needed all the pockets for his camera gear.

“At least I know how to rub my sunscreen in so I don’t have ghost face,” Frank said.

“Will you two shut up?” Nate said.

We walked on. Frank kept looking behind us, as if the driver was going to jump on his back.

“I think he’s fine, Frank,” Nate said. “He’s probably passed out, like you said.”

“What do you know?” Frank said.

“We’re here,” I said. We looked down on glass shards gleaming along a concrete wall surrounding the border station. There was a barbed-wire perimeter and a guard tower. It looked a lot like a jail.

“Give me my film back,” said Frank. “I don’t want you to get hassled if they find it. We say we’re tourists on the Silk Road. We like to take pictures. Don’t mention your father.”

“What’s the problem? That’s mostly true,” I said.

“If there is something going on with the election, they won’t want journalists or politicians’ daughters in there.”

“Why didn’t we think about the election before we decided to come here?” I said.

“They just called it,” Nate said.

“Get some cash out of your wallet now in case they want money,” Frank said. “Don’t let them see how much you have.”

“What will we say about the driver?” I put fifty dollars in my jeans pocket.

“That he attacked us!” Frank said.

“Wait,” Nate said. “You have our list of numbers, right? Let’s memorize the number of the ambassador.”

“Let’s make up a way to remember it,” I said.

“Can’t you just fucking remember it?” Frank said.

I had never seen Frank scared like this. Now I wished we’d gone back to the Chinese border station instead, where Frank could speak Mandarin. In Kyrgyzstan, educated people spoke Russian, not English. We didn’t know who had killed whom in the civil wars here after the U.S.S.R. fell in 1991, or who hated whom now. We didn’t know what they ate, what they were proud of, whether they rolled their R’s.

Soldiers with Kalashnikovs guarded the gates. Frank spoke to them in Mandarin, but they responded in Russian. He shook his head. He hated to be helpless.

The burly guards had light blue eyes, which, we’d been told, had come from Alexander the Great, who had “raped their mothers.” One of them was an especially unusual mixture of Caucasian coloring, pale skin and blonde hair, with broad, Mongolian cheekbones and wide-set light eyes. He was striking, even glamorous.

“English?” Nate said.

“English, OK,” the handsome man said, “passports.”

He looked back and forth from us to our photos and through every page of our passports.

Nate was Jewish and had been to Israel several times. I knew he was worried about the stamps.

“Miss Elizabeth Moore,” the guard said. “Whose wife?”

“She’s with me,” Frank said.

“Mine,” Nate said at the same time.

“Neither?” the guard said.

The guard could see we were rattled. “Miss, come with me.”

“She’s not going with you,” Frank said.

“We must ask some questions.”

“Is there a problem?” Nate said.

“How did you get here?” the guard said.

“You saw us,” Frank said. “We walked.”

“We will ask you some questions and see if there is a problem.”

“You are not going to ask her anything,” Frank said.

“It’s fine,” I said before Frank could say more. We were at a border, and it was normal to be questioned.

They put us in separate rooms. Nate was across the hall from me.

“Sit, please, Elizabeth,” he said, closing the door. “You may call me Alexei. You came in a truck, yes?”



“We tried,” I said, “but the truck got in an accident, and then we walked.”

“Accident?”

“Yes. The driver was on drugs and he hit his face on the steering wheel. He needs help.”

“My friend,” Alexie said, “my pretty little friend, that is not what the driver says. He is with the Chinese. He says the man kicked his seat and tried to kill him and stole his money, one thousand US dollars.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes,” he said, “I think we search your bags and find the money.”

“You’d find our money.”

“I see. You are rich Americans.”

“No!”

“Are you OK?” Nate yelled from across the hall.

“No,” Alexie said, “you have a big problem.”

“We’re just tourists. The truck driver was crazy. He pulled a knife on us.” I waved my hand around, stabbing at the air. “See? A knife.”

He leaned back in his chair. “I don’t see,” he said.

I tried to remember the phone number.

“It was the Jew, wasn’t it? The Jew attacked him because driver is Muslim.”

I didn't want Nate to hear us. I lowered my voice. "No. The driver attacked us because we tried to take a picture of him. All we did was take a picture. Then he tried to stab my leg, here, with his knife."

Alexei didn't look Muslim, but I didn't know much about the ethnicities there. He wore a wedding ring. He was clean-shaven. He looked about thirty years old.

A guard spoke through the door in Russian, loud, cruel syllables.

"He says your friend has many cameras." Alexei shook his head, as if he were sorry to hear it. "It is illegal for journalists to enter without permits."

"I'm not a journalist. We're tourists. He just likes to take pictures."

"You are with an illegal journalist and a violent Jew. I think you must be guilty of something," he said. "What is it? You are a prostitute?"

"No."

"Why do you travel with two men?"

"They're my friends."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I'm not a prostitute."

"Too bad," he said. "You are in trouble. And there's not much else you can do."

"Do you want money?"

"No." He squeezed my shoulders as he walked out of the room. "I am locking the door for your safety."

When he closed the door behind him I tried to steady myself by breathing. But I was trembling, gripping the arms of the chair. He didn't want money.

I looked for a phone, but there wasn't one in the office. I heard Alexei across the hall talking to Nate.

"Why did you come here? You want to hold Kalashnikov? You want to fire Russian guns?"

I couldn't hear Nate's reply.

"What do you want? You want our women?"

I heard Nate wheezing, like he'd been punched in the stomach.

I didn't have many choices. The obvious, the proper thing to do was to resist him. Even if I couldn't physically resist him, if I at least tried to, then I would be the victim, and it wouldn't be my fault, and Frank and Nate would feel bad for me. I could scream for help. But the only people who would want to help me were locked up too, so they would have to listen. What would they hear? A girl who needed help. A girl who didn't have the power, or ability, or the cunning to help herself. A girl who had been a sexual object to both of them now being the sexual object of someone else.

I didn't know why Nate had stopped showing interest in me once we'd arrived in China, but I blamed Frank, which might have been unfair, but I was still angry at Frank for hurting me when he'd been my boyfriend, and now I thought he was keeping Nate from me, too. I was also upset by how Frank had taunted me with the Bangkok story the night before. So even though I

was scared, even though Nate was already hurt, what I wanted in that room was to not be made helpless, to not be prude. I cared less about protecting my body than my ego.

I decided I would do something unconventional, something beyond Frank's understanding of me, something that made me the protagonist, something that took guts and prowess. I would do something that men wanted badly, something that both scared and empowered women. I wanted to control the situation by being a person who acts, a person who is not submissive.

As the road ascended into the thin, cold air of the Tibetan plateau, we saw the curvature of the Earth drop behind the steppes we'd crossed in the past weeks, a sea of dark violet tundra. I was with my ex-boyfriend Frank and our friend Nate, hitch-hiking to Central Asia. We rode in open truck beds amid swiveling barber chairs, bolts of brocaded silk, crates of white Hetian jade and burlap bags of elephant garlic, all bound for export. Our single-track road was made narrower by road workers' tents which clung onto steep mountainsides like fungi. Had there been any vultures that high they would have feasted on the piglet carcasses discarded by the laborers.

On the high passes we shivered in our sleeping bags and breathed in the spectral clouds. I was so happy to be out there. In that cloudscape we were part of the swirling sky, and it was easy to believe in astral travel. Tibet was like that: it appeared to be desolate, unless you were capable of believing in Buddhism, which storied the plateau with roving, ancient atmans. Alpine lakes

shone like lapis lazuli, unexpected luminosity that hummed with the dreams of buddhistavas who lay sleeping under the surface.

The only other girls I saw were prostitutes who hung around army checkpoints and nuns on pilgrimages to Mt. Kailash. The nuns strapped wooden blocks onto their hands to protect their palms as they prostrated every one-hundred-and-eighth step. The prostitutes sat back to back at crossroads, asleep, their long, dirty hair tangling together.

On windy nights the makeshift trucker huts where we slept sang like Theremins conducted from the sky, and sometimes the tarp ceilings blew off, exposing us to the icy, minatory moon. The truckers explained that the wrathful deity White Brahma Buddha was up there slashing the darkness with his sword, protecting the nomads' yaks from the silent snow leopards that crept around us. In the thin air I dreamt of drowning.

Frank worked as a photographer in Beijing, and we were out there because he'd been hired for a series on migrant workers in China's frontier. Frank had invited Nate and then Nate invited me. At home in New York I thought that Nate was interested in me, but since we'd arrived in China his attention had drifted. I didn't know why. I looked for affection in everything they each did.

When Frank introduced me as his wife so truckers wouldn't assume I was for hire, I felt like I was in love with him again, as if he were proposing. But Frank would never propose. His heart orbited around a black hole of independence at the expense of everything else. That's why we'd broken up. When you love someone who privileges freedom above all else, who suspects

you of trying to shrink his world, not expand it, you have two choices: prove to him that love is not possession, or prove that you don't want to possess him. I tried both, but honoring his fears at the expense of mine brought me so much pain, and when he saw how much his ambivalent love hurt me, it confirmed to him that he'd rather be alone. His preferred state was exile, a mode of living by spontaneity, which was like carrying a gun, every moment heightened with the potential for heroism and death.

The thing about Frank is that if you could keep up with him, you got to share in the thrill of his devouring of the world. Like me, he believed the grandeur of his environment could stretch the possibilities of his mind, but, unlike me, he'd deliberately made his life into a search for these landscapes. His photographs were proof that the world he wanted to exist could, but you had to seek it and you had to frame it by your own vision. His photographs made me want to sneak out in the night and jump onto trains and swim in clear rivers and hold your hands out to bonfires. He shot straight into light for the prisms, blind spots, and the blown-out whiteness of ecstasy. He shot the road workers' velvet slippers embossed with the Playboy bunny, and the golden calves of reclining Buddhas, and the sparkling quartz and mica of gneissic cliff faces that belied seismic catastrophes. As my boyfriend, he'd also taken so many portraits of me: of my collar bones under water, of the profile of my sleeping face on his bare chest, of my hair blowing wildly on mountain passes, of my dirty hands offering him coffee, of his palm on my wind-burned, happy cheek. I wanted to be the person I looked like in his photographs. But that person's existence depended on Frank's existence.

After five weeks crossing the plateau we were hungry for food that wasn't instant noodles, thirsty for oxygen, bruised from the bumpy roads, and red from the sun, which glared off the snowpack, burning our necks and eyeballs and chapping our lips and hands. We planned to rest in Kashgar, the palm-treed oasis town that marked the end of the plateau and our descent into the desert, for a few days before our visas expired and we crossed into Kyrgyzstan.

We checked into a hotel in Kashgar — mattresses, coffee that wasn't Nescafe, hot water — and ate in a night bazaar lit by smoky kerosene lamps. Lamb heads and chicken feet hung as advertisements from the vendors' carts. Men tossed noodle dough into long strips like jump ropes. I bought almonds, cinnamon cakes, and figs. With great pleasure we deliberated the next days' meals over over cold Tsingtao beer. Frank was drunk and trying to convince Nate to go to a strip club with him. I thought it was a show Frank was putting on for me, baiting me to object.

"I'm not going," Nate said, "not in a Muslim city."

"But, it's still China. This is what businessmen do here. It's normal. It's like Bangkok."

"You're not businessmen," I said.

"It doesn't feel like Bangkok," Nate said. There were two-humped camels in the street, bearded men in skullcaps embroidered with crescent moons, and watchful women in knotted burkhas.

"Well, it won't be a ping-pong show, but I still think we should go."

"Ping-pong show?" I said. I fell for it.

“The chicks shoot the ping-pong balls out like an air gun,” Frank said. “Their muscles are so strong. You can *feel* it.”

“How do you know what it feels like?” I said.

“What’s it to you? It’s legal.”

“You aren’t supposed to tell her that!” Nate said.

“You paid for it?”

“It’s normal there,” Frank said. “It’s an entire industry.” Frank and I had been dating when they went on that trip to Thailand, and I didn’t know if he’d forgotten that, or if he was being cruel.

“It was a long time ago,” Nate said, “and we just did it once.”

“Maybe you did,” Frank said. “Besides, it’s a good-paying job for them.”

“Don’t act like you’re doing them a favor,” I said.

“You don’t know anything about it,” Frank said. “Don’t be such a prude.”

Even though Frank had lost his virginity to me in high school, and we’d had sex many times, he still called me that. I wasn’t going to argue with him about it in front of Nate, but it hurt my feelings. He acted like he knew everything about sex and I knew nothing. I didn’t like the way he talked about women, but I didn’t like being left out either. Nate would laugh. I couldn’t. I felt defeated by it.

On the way into our hotel bar we stopped at the front desk to ask about the Kyrgyz border crossing.



“Border closes tomorrow,” the man said. “Maybe one week closed.”

“Can we cross tomorrow?” Frank asked.

“I advise leave now,” he said.

“Now?” It was one in the morning.

“Problems at the border, sir,” he said.

“What do you think?” Nate asked, his cigarette hanging from his mouth, his green eyes bright against his new, dark beard. His flannel shirt was covered in dust and his jeans had streaks of engine grease across the thighs. Still, I wanted to put my head against his chest. I wanted him to put his dirty arms around me. I wanted to make Frank shut up.

“I have to get the exit stamp,” Frank said. In order to live legally in Beijing, he had to leave the country every three months. He had three days left on his visa.

“OK, Elizabeth?” Nate said.

“Fine,” I said. It wasn’t fine. I wanted privacy to think about Frank and the prostitute.

“We’ll take a taxi in thirty minutes,” Frank said.

“They’re closing the border because of an election,” Nate said as we walked to our rooms.

“In Kyrgyzstan?” I said.

“They’re expecting riots.”

“Says who?” Frank said.

“State department website.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t go?” I said.

“You know I can’t afford to have problems with my papers,” Frank said.

“The riots will probably just be in the capital,” Nate said.

“So why would they close the border?”

“We have to go,” Frank said to me. “I’ll go deal with the bill. Try not to take such a long time packing.” He went downstairs with his bag.

“What do you know about the election?” I asked Nate.

“I can’t even pronounce the parties’ names. One’s Islamist and the other’s old Soviets.”

“Don’t you think that sounds worse than paperwork problems here?”

“Frank has to get his stamp,” he said, “and I want to see the Pamir Highway. Come on, it’s supposed to be the most beautiful road in the world. We’re so close.”

There had been many times on the trip when I thought we were doing something too risky, like traveling without the required guides and permits into China’s disputed regions, or hitching rides with truckers burnt out on speed. I was tired of being the one who was afraid of everything. I was also mad at Frank for calling me prude, which beyond the sexual insult was what he was always criticizing me for: I was too timid. I was too sheltered. I was too passive. One of the reasons I’d come on this trip was because I wanted to be as unflinching as he was. I clenched my fists so my nails dug into my palms and said to myself, don’t make them regret bringing you.

Downstairs they were squatting around a mah-jongg game with the driver. We bought cold beer and a carton of Gauloises to barter with and took off into the desert in the taxi. The highway soon deteriorated into a dirt track, and when we pulled over to let someone pass, the somnolent smell of sage from under our tires saturated the night air. The taxi driver turned off the headlights to make his car stereo louder and played a Bollywood musical we'd heard all over China, and he loved that we knew the words. We offered him beer, and even though he was Muslim he drank with us. The guys cranked down the windows and stuck their heads out, looking for oncoming traffic, or looking at the sky, which touched down on the desert all around us like a black, silky parachute.

To our right the tundra extended north onto the Mongolian steppe. Unseen, far off on our left, were the Himalayas, holy white peaks in the sky. We sang and drank and smoked. I leaned against Nate's shoulder. This road was developed a century before Christ, when Chinese traded silk for Fergana horses so tough they were said to sweat blood. For hundreds of years caravanserais and cities rose from the sand only because China guarded the secret of silk production—the silk worm.

When I looked into the dark desert I imagined the astronomers who'd made their camps there, tracing the night sky with gold dust to make illuminated manuscripts for their khanates. Riderless donkeys had led thousand-camel caravans loaded with sesame seeds, figs, and magnetic compasses east in return for the bolts of silk that went west, much of it bound for insatiable consumers in Rome. Sutra-seeking pilgrims gathered at these oases, relaying the news

that the prince Siddhartha Gautama had escaped samsara, the cycle of suffering. This exchange of goods, peoples, and ideas continued for six-hundred years, until a scorned princess smuggled silk worms out of China in her coiffure. I looked into the emptiness, knowing that the religions, the warriors, the women, and the empires that made our world had once considered this desert its center.

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The road ended at the border station, a squat concrete building demarcating the end of the Far East. A crowd of women waving maos closed in on the taxi as we slowed. They wore long skirts and their heads were covered in floral scarves that looked like tablecloth scraps. They weren't Chinese. Their cheeks were wider, their eyes like almonds.

"They want to shop in Kashgar," Frank translated as the driver spoke, "before the border closes. They're Kyrgyz."

As we pushed through the women to get our bags from the trunk, their desperation to take our seats scared me. The taxi left us, and before the driver killed its lights, I saw the women's arms throwing our beer bottles out the window.

"Do you think they'll ask about my dad?" I said. My father had been a U.S. Senator since I was eleven. Nate and Frank knew not to bring him up, and I hadn't met anybody who asked

about him yet. But this was our first border crossing. We didn't know if he would help or endanger us out here. I'd refused to carry a diplomatic passport. The only thing I had was a list of phone numbers to call in an emergency.

"I don't think you should say anything," Frank said. "I'll talk."

"But don't lie if they ask you," Nate said.

Few people spoke English well enough to talk to me without going through Frank, so I wasn't worried about being confronted. I doubted the border guards would recognize my name, Elizabeth Austen Moore, and even if they did, I trusted Frank to handle it.

To make the border crossing we needed to get through this Chinese post with tourist exit stamps, as opposed to press corps stamps, and then clear the Kyrgyz customs on the other side. We divvied Frank's camera gear between us so he wouldn't look like a journalist.

"Don't leave me alone," I said to Frank.

"You've got the rest of my film," he said. "I won't."

We went together to speak to the Han guard. He copied our names into a ledger and asked us to sign. I loved seeing our names in that book, neat block letters amid Cyrillic curves and Mandarin characters.

"He says it's ten kilometers of demilitarized road to the Kyrgyz border station. We have to hitch with one of these truckers," Frank said. The guard wrote the exit date on the visas in our passports and didn't ask to search the bags or about my name.

"Demilitarized?" I said.

“Welcome to the U.S.S.R.,” Nate said. He was thrilled. We were entering the outposts of the former Russian empire. We didn’t know anybody else who’d been there.

The sun was rising behind us. It wasn’t a soft light, wasn’t romantic or pink. The atmosphere was so clear and the distances around us so vast that the cold dawn lit us like a harsh halogen bulb switched on in the middle of the night, tingeing our faces in an electromotive green.

Frank pointed to a truck painted in a technicolor lattice pattern and a mural of a Pakistani Airlines jet over the Hindu Kush. Dozens of small brass bells hung from the bumper, and flashing rope lights looped around the back. A young man in an Air Jordan t-shirt sang along to pop music as he cleaned his windshield. Frank wanted to photograph him. The trucker showed his truck off to Frank, who was so excited he forgot not to look like a journalist, setting up his tripod and walking around the truck with his light meter.

The trucker agreed to take us to the Kyrgyz border station for about five bucks, though there was barely room for us. The front seat was taken up by a bedroll, blankets, and clothes, which I sat on. Coins and whirligigs hung from the ceiling on ribbons. He made us take off our shoes, and the guys’ feet stank up the cab. They crawled to the space behind the front seats and sat on boxes of radishes. We drove slowly, the driver yelling over the music and grating engine. I could tell he was asking Frank about me.

“Meiyou, meiyou,” Frank said, which means no, not possible.

“He has track marks,” I said, looking at his bruised, thin arms. His teeth and gums were stained black from chewing betel.

We'd driven about five kilometers, halfway, when Frank pulled out his camera. The driver watched him in the rearview mirror. Even though Frank had already taken dozens of photographs of him in the lot, now the driver waved his arms and shook his head.

"Something's wrong with him," Frank said. "He's slurring." Frank apologized, but before he put his camera away we all heard the click of the shutter.

The driver turned to Frank, black spit dripping down his chin. Frank yelled at him, pointing at the road. It was as if the man forgot he was driving. He pulled a knife from under his seat. There was so little space in the cab that we couldn't back away from him. Frank tried to calm him, but he wasn't listening.

There weren't any doors in the back where they were sitting. "Open the door, Elizabeth," Nate said. "Jump out!"

"Too fast," I said. I had my hands on the ceiling, caught up in the ribbons and clinking medallions, trying to protect my head as we bounced over deep ruts.

Nate kicked at the driver's seat, jiggling it back and forth, trying to break the man's angry trance. The driver stabbed his knife into the pile of bedding between us. The way the blade sunk into the thick wool blanket terrified me. I was as close as I could get to the door.

"Don't touch her!" Nate yelled, kicking harder. The driver's seat wasn't locked into place, and it sprang forward. His face hit the steering wheel, and we went off the road as he lay limp over the wheel. I jumped out. I tried to roll when I hit the ground but really just lay there where I landed. The truck stopped in the sandy soil.

“Are you hurt?” Nate said.

“No,” I said, but I didn’t get up. He put his hand on my head, as if he were checking to see if I had a fever. I stared up at him. I wanted to stay like that.

“What’s wrong with her?” Frank said.

“Nothing.” Nate pulled me up and hugged my face into his chest and kissed my forehead.

“Is the driver hurt?” I said.

Nate went to check.

“Don’t get too close,” I said.

“What are we going to do about it if he is hurt?” Frank said.

“There’s blood coming out of his nose,” Nate said.

“Should we wait for the next truck?”

“I am not getting in another truck,” Frank said. “Let’s start walking.”

“We can’t leave him,” I said.

“He’s breathing,” Nate said. “We’ll tell the first person we see. What can we do for him? He still has that knife in his hand.” Nate pulled our shoes and bags out of the cab.

I looked in from the passenger side. I didn’t think we should leave him.

“What was he saying?” Nate asked.

“I don’t know,” Frank said. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Nate and I looked at each other, surprised at the panic in Frank’s voice. I didn’t have a good argument for staying. We were afraid to get within arm’s length of him. We decided to



wave down the first car we saw and explain what had happened. We put on our backpacks and walked to the road. It was hilly enough that we couldn't see far in front of us. We walked west, towards Kyrgyzstan.

It got hot fast out there, and my adrenaline faded. We stopped at an abandoned truck alongside the road, its wheels deep in the sand. The wooden truck bed had exploded from being overpacked with garlic that must have swelled in the sun. Garlic cloves piled like drip castles underneath the splits in the siding. We sat on our bags in the pungent shade of the truck.

"We're protected from vampires," I said.

"Yetis are our real problem out here," Nate said, "and cracked-out drivers."

"I'm worried about him."

"He was probably shooting up before we got in," Frank said, "and now he's passed out."

"He's not passed out," I said. "He's hurt." I knew Frank was acting like this because he felt guilty about taking that last photograph. We were in a no-man's-land between the Chinese and Kyrgyz governments. It was a bad place for anyone to be hurt.

We saw a car coming from the China side. Frank walked to the road to wave it down. Kyrgyz women were crammed into the back seats. The women were pointing at us, their white fingertips pressed against the window. They didn't stop.

"What was that?" Nate said.

"Let's keep walking," I said. "I don't like being trapped in here."

"Frank, why wouldn't they stop?" Nate said.

“I don’t know.”

I was worried for him. Frank was the one with the most to lose if we got in trouble with China. He had been hired by a German newspaper to photograph the next year’s Olympics, and he intended to stay in Beijing a long time. He was so proud of his fluency; he’d done all the necessary negotiating on the road for us, ordered all our food, translated the truckers’ stories. He brought Mandarin workbooks with him to improve his vocabulary, and he asked lots of questions of people we met, always trying to understand the language and the people better. But, he had a bad temper and could be callous about important things, like if we were responsible for the driver.

“They’re just looking at us because we’re weird,” I said.

“Speak for yourself,” Frank said.

“You’re the weirdest thing out here,” I said. I wanted to make them laugh. “Those fucking pants.” Frank wore fake North Face cargo pants that unzipped at the knee. He said he needed all the pockets for his camera gear.

“At least I know how to rub my sunscreen in so I don’t have ghost face,” Frank said.

“Will you two shut up?” Nate said.

We walked on. Frank kept looking behind us, as if the driver was going to jump on his back.

“I think he’s fine, Frank,” Nate said. “He’s probably passed out, like you said.”

“What do you know?” Frank said.

“We’re here,” I said. We looked down on glass shards gleaming along a concrete wall surrounding the border station. There was a barbed-wire perimeter and a guard tower. It looked a lot like a jail.

“Give me my film back,” said Frank. “I don’t want you to get hassled if they find it. We say we’re tourists on the Silk Road. We like to take pictures. Don’t mention your father.”

“What’s the problem? That’s mostly true,” I said.

“If there is something going on with the election, they won’t want journalists or politicians’ daughters in there.”

“Why didn’t we think about the election before we decided to come here?” I said.

“They just called it,” Nate said.

“Get some cash out of your wallet now in case they want money,” Frank said. “Don’t let them see how much you have.”

“What will we say about the driver?” I put fifty dollars in my jeans pocket.

“That he attacked us!” Frank said.

“Wait,” Nate said. “You have our list of numbers, right? Let’s memorize the number of the ambassador.”

“Let’s make up a way to remember it,” I said.

“Can’t you just fucking remember it?” Frank said.

I had never seen Frank scared like this. Now I wished we’d gone back to the Chinese border station instead, where Frank could speak Mandarin. In Kyrgyzstan, educated people spoke

Russian, not English. We didn't know who had killed whom in the civil wars here after the U.S.S.R. fell in 1991, or who hated whom now. We didn't know what they ate, what they were proud of, whether they rolled their R's.

Soldiers with Kalashnikovs guarded the gates. Frank spoke to them in Mandarin, but they responded in Russian. He shook his head. He hated to be helpless.

The burly guards had light blue eyes, which, we'd been told, had come from Alexander the Great, who had "raped their mothers." One of them was an especially unusual mixture of Caucasian coloring, pale skin and blonde hair, with broad, Mongolian cheekbones and wide-set light eyes. He was striking, even glamorous.

"English?" Nate said.

"English, OK," the handsome man said, "passports."

He looked back and forth from us to our photos and through every page of our passports.

Nate was Jewish and had been to Israel several times. I knew he was worried about the stamps.

"Miss Elizabeth Moore," the guard said. "Whose wife?"

"She's with me," Frank said.

"Mine," Nate said at the same time.

"Neither?" the guard said.

The guard could see we were rattled. "Miss, come with me."

"She's not going with you," Frank said.

"We must ask some questions."

“Is there a problem?” Nate said.

“How did you get here?” the guard said.

“You saw us,” Frank said. “We walked.”

“We will ask you some questions and see if there is a problem.”

“You are not going to ask her anything,” Frank said.

“It’s fine,” I said before Frank could say more. We were at a border, and it was normal to be questioned.

They put us in separate rooms. Nate was across the hall from me.

“Sit, please, Elizabeth,” he said, closing the door. “You may call me Alexei. You came in a truck, yes?”

“We tried,” I said, “but the truck got in an accident, and then we walked.”

“Accident?”

“Yes. The driver was on drugs and he hit his face on the steering wheel. He needs help.”

“My friend,” Alexie said, “my pretty little friend, that is not what the driver says. He is with the Chinese. He says the man kicked his seat and tried to kill him and stole his money, one thousand US dollars.”

“That’s not true.”

“Yes,” he said, “I think we search your bags and find the money.”

“You’d find our money.”

“I see. You are rich Americans.”

“No!”

“Are you OK?” Nate yelled from across the hall.

“No,” Alexie said, “you have a big problem.”

“We’re just tourists. The truck driver was crazy. He pulled a knife on us.” I waved my hand around, stabbing at the air. “See? A knife.”

He leaned back in his chair. “I don’t see,” he said.

I tried to remember the phone number.

“It was the Jew, wasn’t it? The Jew attacked him because driver is Muslim.”

I didn’t want Nate to hear us. I lowered my voice. “No. The driver attacked us because we tried to take a picture of him. All we did was take a picture. Then he tried to stab my leg, here, with his knife.”

Alexei didn’t look Muslim, but I didn’t know much about the ethnicities there. He wore a wedding ring. He was clean-shaven. He looked about thirty years old.

A guard spoke through the door in Russian, loud, cruel syllables.

“He says your friend has many cameras.” Alexei shook his head, as if he were sorry to hear it. “It is illegal for journalists to enter without permits.”

“I’m not a journalist. We’re tourists. He just likes to take pictures.”

“You are with an illegal journalist and a violent Jew. I think you must be guilty of something,” he said. “What is it? You are a prostitute?”

“No.”

“Why do you travel with two men?”

“They’re my friends.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m not a prostitute.”

“Too bad,” he said. “You are in trouble. And there’s not much else you can do.”

“Do you want money?”

“No.” He squeezed my shoulders as he walked out of the room. “I am locking the door for your safety.”

When he closed the door behind him I tried to steady myself by breathing. But I was trembling, gripping the arms of the chair. He didn’t want money.

I looked for a phone, but there wasn’t one in the office. I heard Alexei across the hall talking to Nate.

“Why did you come here? You want to hold Kalashnikov? You want to fire Russian guns?”

I couldn’t hear Nate’s reply.

“What do you want? You want our women?”

I heard Nate wheezing, like he’d been punched in the stomach.

I didn’t have many choices. The obvious, the proper thing to do was to resist him. Even if I couldn’t physically resist him, if I at least tried to, then I would be the victim, and it wouldn’t be my fault, and Frank and Nate would feel bad for me. I could scream for help. But the only

people who would want to help me were locked up too, so they would have to listen. What would they hear? A girl who needed help. A girl who didn't have the power, or ability, or the cunning to help herself. A girl who had been a sexual object to both of them now being the sexual object of someone else.

I didn't know why Nate had stopped showing interest in me once we'd arrived in China, but I blamed Frank, which might have been unfair, but I was still angry at Frank for hurting me when he'd been my boyfriend, and now I thought he was keeping Nate from me, too. I was also upset by how Frank had taunted me with the Bangkok story the night before. So even though I was scared, even though Nate was already hurt, what I wanted in that room was to not be made helpless, to not be prude. I cared less about protecting my body than my ego.

I decided I would do something unconventional, something beyond Frank's understanding of me, something that made me the protagonist, something that took guts and prowess. I would do something that men wanted badly, something that both scared and empowered women. I wanted to control the situation by being a person who acts, a person who is not submissive.



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